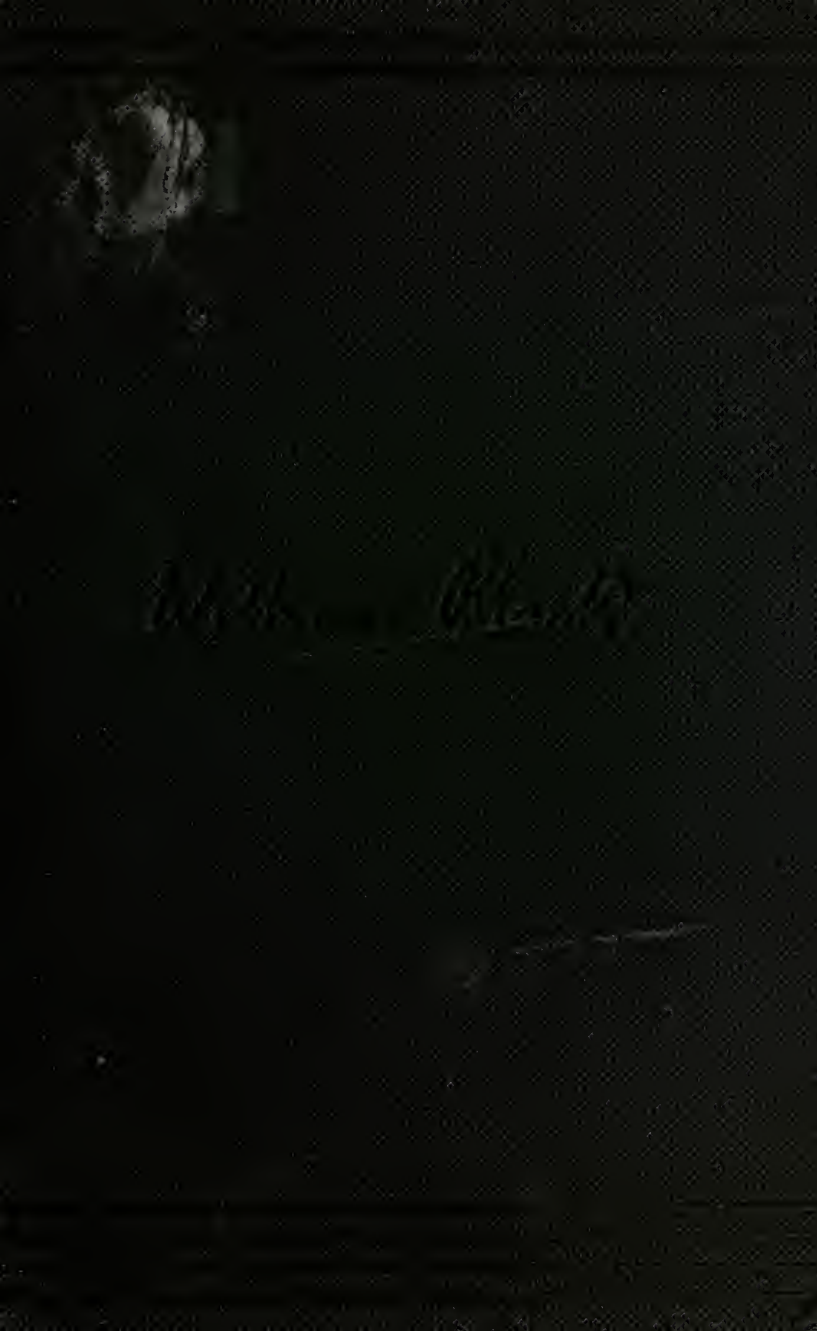






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THE BEAUTIFUL WRETCH

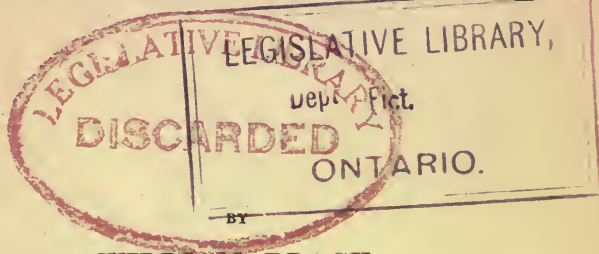
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THE
BEAUTIFUL WRETCH



WILLIAM BLACK

NEW AND REVISED EDITION

LONDON
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & COMPANY
LIMITED

St. Dunstan's House

1893

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THE BEAUTIFUL WRETCH.

CHAPTER I.

SINGING SAL.

ON a certain golden afternoon in August, when the sea was as still and radiant as the vaulted blue overhead, and when the earth was lying so hushed and silent that you would have thought it was listening for the chirp of the small birds among the gorse, a young girl of about seventeen or so was walking over the downs that undulate, wave on wave, from Newhaven all along the coast to Brighton. This young lady was tall for her age ; slim of form ; and she had a graceful carriage ; her face was fair and markedly freckled ; her nose was piquant rather than classical ; her hair, which was of a ruddy gold hue, was rebellious, and strayed about her ears and neck in accidental wisps and rings : her grayish or gray-blue eyes were reserved and thoughtful rather than shrewd and observant.

No, she was not beautiful; but she had a face that attracted interest; and though her look was timid and retiring, nevertheless her eyes could, on occasion, light up with a sudden humour that was inclined to be sarcastic. So busy, indeed, was she generally, on these solitary wanderings of hers, with her own thoughts and fancies, that sometimes she laughed to herself—a low, quiet little laugh that none but herself could hear.

This was Miss Anne Beresford, who was called by her sisters Nan. But it was an old friend of the family, and one of England's most famous sailors, who, at a very early period of her career, had bestowed on her the sobriquet of the Beautiful Wretch; and that partly because she was a pretty and winning child, and partly because she was in the habit of saying surprisingly irreverent things. Now, all children say irreverent things, simply because they read the highest mysteries by the light of their own small experiences; but Nan Beresford's guesses at the supernatural were more than usually audacious. When, for example, she arrived at the conclusion that fairies were never seen in the daytime for the reason that God had had them all "fwied for his bweakfast," it was clear that she was bringing a quite independent mind to bear on the phenomena of the universe around her. And

then, of course, all sorts of sayings that she never uttered or thought of were attributed to her. Whenever a story was particularly wicked, it was sure to be put down to Nan Beresford. The old Admiral, who had at the outset given her that nickname, spent a great deal of time that might have been profitably employed otherwise in deliberately inventing impieties, each of which was bruited about in certain circles as "Nan's last;" and if you happened to meet him anywhere between the United Service Club and Spring Gardens, completely self-absorbed, his face brimming over with laughter, you might be sure he was just putting on a finishing touch. Rather than abandon one of these self-invented stories of his, I think he would have parted with any half-dozen of his crosses and medals; but indeed this last would not have been difficult, for he had served in every part of the world where a ship would float, and honours and dignities had been showered upon him.

Naturally, there came a time when these stories had to cease; but Nan Beresford preserved her independent way of looking at things, and she was clearly the clever one of the family. Moreover, with all her retiring ways, she was always quite capable of holding her own. Her elder sisters were handsome, and a good many

young gentlemen, amongst others, came about the house ; some of whom, thinking to be facetious, would occasionally begin to tease Miss Nan, she being the youngest admitted to lunch or afternoon tea. But this shy, freckled young person, whose eyes could laugh up so quickly, had a nimbleness of wit and dexterity of fence that usually left her antagonist exceedingly sorry. One can imagine a gay young swallow darting about in the evening, having quite satisfied himself as to food, and thinking only in his frolicsome way of chevying and frightening the innocent insect tribe. But what if, by dire mischance, he should dart at something and find he had seized—a wasp ! Some of the merry young gentlemen were glad to leave the Beautiful Wretch alone.

However, all these things must now be looked upon as bygones. Seventeen has come ; its dignity and seriousness have followed upon the frolics of untutored youth ; and the sweet charm of maidenhood has smoothed down such angularities as were formerly permissible. If Miss Anne Beresford shows her independence now, it is mostly in a sort of half-declared contempt of sentimentalities and flirtations—of which, to be sure, she sees a good deal around her. She likes to be alone ; she reads much ; she has ideas ; she

worships Mr. Huxley ; and she needs no other company than her own when she goes off on long explorations of curving shore or inland vale. On this particular afternoon, for example, she was walking all the way to Brighton from New-haven, having already walked to the latter place in the morning ; and as her light and free step carried her over the close, warm, thyme-scented turf, she was smiling to herself—at some incident, no doubt, that her memory had recalled.

Well, at this moment some one addressed her.
“ Young lady ! ”

She had been vaguely aware that a woman was sitting there, by the side of some furze bushes ; but she had kept her eyes away, being a little afraid of tramps. On being challenged, however, she turned and looked, and then she saw that this was no ordinary tramp, but an itinerant musician well known along the south coast by the name of Singing Sal. She was a good-looking, trimly-dressed, strapping wench of five-and-twenty, with a sun-tanned face, brilliant white teeth when she laughed, and big brown eyes that were at once friendly and audacious in their scrutiny. She looked indeed more like a farmer's daughter dressed for market-day ; but on one side of her, on the green-sward, lay a guitar ; and on the other, a little leather wallet that

she had unstrapped. Apparently she had been having a nap on this warm afternoon, for she was smoothing down her black hair.

"I beg your pardon, Miss," she said, with very great respect, but with a sort of timidly friendly look in her eyes, "but I have often seen you as you was walking along the downs; and many's the time I have wished to have a word with you, if there was nobody by. Yes, and many's the time I have thought about you."

Nan Beresford hesitated for a second whether she should stay or not. But she knew this young woman very well by sight; and her appearance and manner were alike extremely prepossessing. Nan had heard her sing, but never speak; and she was surprised by the correct way in which she spoke; she had scarcely anything of the Sussex intonation.

"Yes," said Singing Sal, looking up at the young lady, "many's the time that I have thought I should like to tell you what I've been thinking about you, as I saw you go by. I've often been thinking that if one could only see into it, the mind of a young lady like you—brought up like you in the middle of nothing but kindness and goodness—why, it must be the most beautiful thing in the world. Just like that out there—clear and silver-like."

She nodded in the direction of the sea—where the pale blue plain was touched here and there with silver and golden reflections. Nan was embarrassed; nevertheless she remained. There was something winning about the fresh-coloured, frank-eyed lass.

“And I think I have seen a little bit into your mind, Miss,” said she, with a smile. “Would you look at this—if I may make so bold?”

There was a bit of red silk round her neck, and attached to it was a florin. She held up the perforated coin, and glanced at the face of the young girl. Nan Beresford blushed.

“You remember, Miss? That was the night as I was singing in front of the Old Ship, though what I did that for I don’t know; I prefer my own friends and my own haunts. But do you know what I said to myself when I got to my lodgings that night? I said, ‘What was the young lady thinking of when she gave you that florin? It wasn’t an accident; for she took it carefully out of her purse. And it wasn’t because she thought you were starving; for you don’t look like that. No, she gave it to you that you might think it enough for one night’s earnings, and go away home, and not be stared at any longer by a crowd of men. That was

what the young lady was thinking in her mind ; and if ever you spend that two shillings, Sal, you'll be a mean wretch.' And many's the time I thought I would like to speak to ye, Miss, if only as it might be to ask your name."

This woman was frank even to boldness in her scrutiny, and her manner was rough and ready ; but there was a touch of something fine about her—something true, downright, unmistakable—that somehow won people's confidence. Nan Beresford drew nearer to her, though she remained standing.

"Is there anything——?" said Nan ; and then she stopped.[!] She was about to ask if there was anything she could do for this new acquaintance ; but she suddenly reflected that the young woman was smartly dressed and apparently well-to-do. Singing Sal quickly broke in on her embarrassment.

"Yes," she said, smiling, "you don't like my making a show of myself—singing for coppers in the street. But isn't there worse than that among the people you live among, Miss? Mind, I see life in the rough ; I can't always choose my company ; and I have to take things as they come ; but when I hear of very fine young ladies—mind, not poor girls driven by starvation, or

forced to support a sick mother, or kicked out of doors by a drunken father—and these fine ladies going and selling themselves for so many thousands a year and a swell carriage—well, it sounds queer, I think. But I'm sure, Miss," she said, regarding the girl, "you won't make a marriage for money. You don't look like that."

Again Nan Beresford flushed hastily ; and she said, with a touch of anger, "I prefer not to speak of such things. I am tired of listening to women who can talk of nothing but sweethearts and marriage. Surely there are other matters of as much importance——"

But then it occurred to her that this was scarcely civil ; so she turned to this pleasant-looking stranger and said, with a grave courtesy, "I presume you are returning to Brighton?"

"Yes, I am."

"To remain there?"

Sal laughed in her quiet way.

"Lord love you, my dear young lady, I never saw the town yet that could hold me for more than a couple o' nights. I live in the open. This is what I like best—open sea, open sky, open downs. I do believe my forefathers were either gipsies, or else they had had a good dose o' the tread-mill ; for I'm never content but when I'm

on the trudge—wet weather or fine, all's the same to me ; but four square walls I can't endure."

"I am afraid you must lead a very solitary life," said Nan, with sincere compassion.

"Why, bless you, Miss, the world is full of things," said the other cheerfully ; "and as you tramp along there's always something turning up for you to look at. Oh, I've plenty of friends, too, for the matter of that. I bring a bit of news to the farms, and sometimes toys for the coast-guardsmen's children—else the women would get jealous ; and I have an eye for the mackerel-shoals, for the fishermen ; and I know where the sailors are, if there's any sport going on. Yes, I have a good many friends, Miss. I can tell you it would be a bad business for any one who laid a finger on me, anywheres between Dover and Portsmouth ; I think the word would be passed along pretty quick. Not that I can't take care o' myself," added Sal with a modest smile. "I'm not afraid to be out o' nights, when I know where my bed is ; and sometimes I can do without that. Why, that is the best of all the tramps—a clear moonlight night along these downs ; and you have the whole world to yourself ; everything and everybody asleep, except maybe a watchdog up at one of the farms. And the ships out at sea—you can tell whether they're

going up or down Channel by the red or the green light, and you think of the poor chap at the helm, and hope he'll get soon home to his wife and children. That is a real fine tramp, Miss ; you want to sing almost, and yet it's too beautiful to be broken by a sound. And then there's a fortnight in the Spring when the birds come over—oh ! that's wonderful. If you start about half-past two or a quarter to three, you get in amongst them ; and the first thing you hear is the whistle, quick, and sharp, and yet far away, of the curlews. Then you begin to feel that they are passing overhead ; you can't see anything ; it is like a whisper filling all the air ; the darkness is just full of wings—soft and soft ; you're afraid to put up your hand in case you might hurt some poor creature at the end of its long voyage ; and you listen and listen as you walk along, waiting for the gray daylight in the east, to show them where to pick up some food in the fields. Ah ! Miss, if you only had the courage to rise as early as that——”

“ Oh, I will—I will ! ” said Nan eagerly, quite forgetting what her mother might have to say about this strange acquaintance. “ But what has made you take to such a way of living ? You are very well educated.”

“ You are kind to say so, Miss,” remarked

Singing Sal, who was evidently greatly pleased. "But it's little education I ever got, except from two or three books I have made companions of, like. I kept my father's shop in Tunbridge until he married a second time ; then it grew too hot for me, rather ; and so I took to the road, and I've never regretted it. Human nature is what I like to look at ; and if I may make so bold as to say it, I guess there's more human nature among the poor folk than among the rich. But I'll tell you about that some other time," she added, returning to her ordinary free-and-easy manner. "I see you want to go. You've looked at your watch twice."

"But you're going to Brighton also?" said Nan, somewhat timidly.

"Not with you, Miss," was the prompt reply. "No, no. But perhaps, if it is not making too free, you will be so friendly as to tell me your name?"

"My name is Anne Beresford, and I live in Brunswick Terrace," said Nan.

"Thank ye kindly, Miss," said Singing Sal, regarding the young lady with great friendliness and respect. "Maybe I shall see you some other day on the downs, for I think you are as fond of them as I am myself. Good-bye, Miss."

She rose with some sense of natural courtesy.

But she rather turned away, also ; and she kept her hands behind her. So Nan bade her good-bye in return ; and continued on her way along the lonely cliffs.

Some considerable time thereafter, when Nan Beresford was nearing Brighton, she turned and looked behind her ; and she could make out, on the summit of one of the rounded undulations towards Rottingdean, the figure of a woman, whom she at once guessed to be Singing Sal. That solitary figure was impressive there—high up on the edge of the slope ; the still, shining sea far below her ; and all around her and illumining her, as it were, the reddening glow flooding over from the westering sun. Nan—perhaps moved by some subtle compunction, perhaps only in token of friendly remembrance—took out her handkerchief and waved it twice ; but there was no response.

CHAPTER II.

IN BRUNSWICK TERRACE.

THAT same afternoon all Brighton was astir with curiosity because of a large vessel that had slowly come in from the west before an almost imperceptible breeze. She came unusually, and, as some thought, dangerously close in shore ; and no doubt she looked even larger than she really was, for she had every stitch of canvas set, from her royals down to her lower studding sails, that stood out on each side like great bat's wings ; while all this mass of sail was dark in shadow against the western glow. As the spectators watched her, those among them who knew a little about nautical matters guessed that this must be a man-of-war from the rapidity with which she began to furl her sails—letting the golden light shine along between her spars ; while they further concluded, from the fact that only a kedge was thrown out at her bows, that her stay in these shallow waters would be brief.

Now we must see how the advent of this stranger was regarded by the occupants of a certain drawing-room in Brunswick Terrace. These were five—a mother, son, and three daughters; and as they will all appear, more or less, in the following history, it may be as well to introduce them now and categorically to the reader.

First of all came Lady Beresford herself—an elderly, sallow-faced, weak-looking woman, the widow of a General Officer who had got his K.C.B.-ship for long service in India. She had a nervous system that she worshipped as a sort of fetish; and in turn the obliging divinity relieved her from many of the cares and troubles of this wearyful world. For how could she submit to any discomfort or privation (the family were not very well off for their station in life); or how could she receive objectionable visitors, or investigate cases of harrowing distress, or remonstrate with careless livery-stable keepers, or call to account extortionate milliners when this precious nervous system had to be considered? Lady Beresford turned away from these things and ordered round her bath-chair, and was taken out to the end of the Pier, that she might be soothed by the music and the sea-air.

The eldest daughter in this drawing-room (the eldest daughter of the family was married and in India) had not much nervousness about her. She was a handsome, tall, blonde girl of the clear-cut English type, cold and even proud in manner, strict in the performance of all her duties, and not very charitable in her criticism of others. She had a good figure ; she dressed well ; clear health shone in her pale, fair face and bright, cold eyes. She was a daring horsewoman. Her brother called her "Nails," which was a final contraction for "Old Hard-as-Nails."

The next sister, Edith, that same graceless youth was in the habit of calling "The Sentimental." She was the darkest of the family, and the most beautiful also, where every one was more or less good-looking. She had soft brown hair, dark blue-gray eyes of the tenderest expression, and a beseeching innocent look. She was fond of music ; played and sang very fairly herself ; but she was most admirable as a listener. In a room filled with half-murmuring people, she alone remained mute and devoted ; her chair drawn close to the piano ; her form motionless. It is true her brother boldly attributed Edith's strict observance of this attitude to the fact that she knew she had a striking profile, and that in no other way could she be so well seen by the

room. But then there are some people who will say anything.

In point of family order Nan Beresford came next; but, as we have seen, she was at this moment away out on the downs, marching briskly, and much pleased with herself and the world generally.

"The Baby" was the youngest of the sisters—a pretty child of fifteen; a trifle spoiled and bad-tempered, otherwise characterless enough. So now we may pass on to the personage who considered himself of chief consequence in the house—Mr. Thomas Beresford, the only son, who now stood at the window, thrumming on the panes, to the infinite annoyance of his mother. He was an exceedingly handsome boy of about eighteen, slightly built, tall, and dressed with an elaborate precision. The lad was clever enough, and good-natured enough, but he had been spoiled all his life long—first by his sisters, and then by the men who wanted to marry his sisters. He harried and worried the whole household indiscriminately, but he was especially hard upon Nan. He said Nan had a character that he wished to form. Girls wanted roughing. There was far too much flimsiness and fashionability about their social circle. In time he trusted to be able to make something out of Nan.

Well, he was thrumming contemplatively on the window-panes, watching this big, dark ship come along from the west.

"Thomas, I wish you would cease that distressing noise," said his mother, with a plaintive sigh.

He ceased his thrumming and took to whistling.

"Tom," said the musical sister, "I do wish you wouldn't try to pick up new airs. You can't do it. Why don't you keep to 'Home, Sweet Home,' or 'In a Cottage near a Wood' ?——"

But, to give effect to this remonstrance, she had turned in her chair in which she was reading, and, in so doing, came in sight of the window, and the sea, and the new arrival there.

"Oh !" she exclaimed, "what a beautiful large yacht !"

The youth at the window shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you *are* a fool," he said politely.

"Thank you," she replied.

"I'll tell you what—it's a man-o'-war brig," continued he, with an air of importance. "And what's more, I hope the fellow knows where he's coming to. I don't see them taking any sound-

ings ; and the notion of bringing a man-o'-war in here——”

He went and got an opera-glass, and returned to the window. He would make observations ; perhaps, if need were, he might put off in a small boat and offer to assist in the navigation of the ship.

“ Young women,” he exclaimed, suddenly, “ a light strikes me. That’s the *Fly-by-Night*.”

“ You pretend you can make out the ship’s name at that distance,” said the eldest sister, with the slightest of smiles.

“ Not with the glass, but by the intuition of genius,” he retorted, coolly. “ What’s more, I can tell you the name of her commanding officer, Miss Nails. Which his initials are Francis Holford King.”

“ King ? ” said his mother, with but little interest. “ Oh, yes ; I remember.”

“ And he’s coming to pay you a visit ; that’s what’s the matter,” continued the youth, still with the glass raised. “ Nails, you’d better hide that novel, and pretend you’ve been sewing. Beauty [this was an alternative name for the second sister], are you at the proper angle ? Baby, smooth out your pinafore.”

“ Thomas, I insist on your treating your sisters with more respect ! ” his mother said, angrily.

"Well, I should almost like to be that fellow," continued Thomas, with perfect good-humour. "Fancy: at five-and-twenty, commanding a ten-gun brig! He has brains, that chap; not like the others that come fooling around here. Why, old Stratherne told me all about him. They made him a Lieutenant when he was just of age."

"With your abilities, Tom," said his eldest sister, "I suppose you'll be commanding one of her Majesty's ships, too, when you're five-and-twenty."

He was not at all crushed by the sarcasm.

"My abilities," he said, still looking through the glass, "are, I know, remarkable; but I think, on the whole, a rich widow will be more in my line of country."

By this time all the girls had come to the window to watch the busy scene without—the small sailing-boats and rowing-boats passing and repassing under the bows and stern of the brig, their occupants staring at the guns in the open ports or listening to the fiddling on the fore-castle, where the men were dancing. But the interest of the Beresfords was concentrated rather on the gig that waited below, at the foot of the accommodation-ladder, with five blue-jackets in her. They saw an officer descend

and step into the stern of the gig ; then she was shoved off, and simultaneously the oars struck the water. In a very few minutes the bow of the boat was run up on the beach, the gang-board put out, and then the officer stepped ashore.

“ Oh, my ! ain’t we resplendent ? ” remarked the brother of the girls, apparently to himself. “ But it will be mortally awkward, young sir, if your ship should get aground, with the tide ebbing. Lawks-a-mussy ! a court-martial. Even your first-class certificates, and Sir George Stratherne, and all the Lords put together, couldn’t get you out of that. And, then, the ignominy of it ! *Question* : What on earth made you take the *Fly-by-Night* in to Brighton ? *Answer* : Please, sir—ax yer pardon, sir !—I only wanted to spoon one o’ them docsid pretty Beresford girls.”

“ Thomas, leave the room ! ” said his mother, in a violent rage.

Thomas could not help it ; he had to go. But he said as he passed by her,

“ Take care, mother ; you are involving yourself in something serious. Her Majesty’s brig *Fly-by-Night* will be aground in about two twinkles ! ”

A few minutes later Lady Beresford was

handed a card, inscribed "Lieutenant Francis Holford King, R.N.;" and shortly thereafter the owner of the card presented himself in the drawing-room. Now, there can be no doubt that her Majesty's uniform, especially when women-folk are the spectators, lends a certain dignity to the human figure; but, even in ordinary dress, this new-comer would have seemed to most a manly-looking, well-built young fellow, who had some decision in his face, and a very straightforward way of looking at people. He was of middle height, slight and square-shouldered; his forehead square; his hair black, likewise the short moustache twisted at the ends; while his eyes were of that singularly dark and luminous blue that one never sees, oddly enough, except in the eyes of sailors. However, there was nothing of the robustious, shiver-my-timbers, conventional sailor about him; his manner was somewhat reserved; he had a touch of gravity beyond his years; perhaps he had acquired it through being put at an early age in command of so many men; but it never forsook him—not even in the ward-room, among his brother officers.

He seemed shy, also. When he had shaken hands with Lady Beresford and her daughters, and sat down, there was a distinct flush on the

sun-brown face; and he proceeded to say, hastily,

“I—I heard you had come down here at the end of the season, Lady Beresford—Admiral Stratherne told me—and I had a telegram to send off; so I thought I might take the chance of finding you not gone abroad yet.”

“I am not going abroad this year,” Lady Beresford said, wearily. “Really my nerves cannot stand the perpetual fatigue and worry of the railway stations and hotels. But the girls are going—by themselves. It is becoming quite common now. They don’t want even to have a maid with them; and really I am ashamed of the attention I require——”

“Nan is going with us too,” said Miss Beresford, staring into the fireplace, where there was no fire.

“Oh! indeed,” said the grave young lieutenant.

“She has never been abroad before. Won’t her eyes grow big! She has a great capacity for wonder and admiration; she will do all our reverence for us at the proper shrines.”

“You have seen Sir George recently, then?” said Lady Beresford.

“At Portsmouth last week. They were all down from the Admiralty.”

"What a dear old gentleman he is!" she said.

"He is the finest sailor and the best-hearted gentleman in her Majesty's service—and that's not saying a small thing," was the answer, prompt and straight.

"You are a great pet of his," said Miss Beresford, "are you not?"

"He has been a very good friend to me. But you needn't imagine it is because of that I respect him—that I more than respect him—I love him."

There was a touch of earnestness in his voice and in the simplicity of the phrase, that made Miss Beresford regard him for a second with almost wondering eyes. She had never seen, for her part, anything about Sir George Stratherne to be enthusiastic about.

However, she had to continue the conversation unaided, for her mother was too languid. Beauty had got into an effective position, and was content to be silent, while the Baby was useless. So she said with a smile,

"I hope Sir George won't have to find fault with you for bringing your ship into these shallow waters. Tom—my brother Tom, you know—is very anxious about it. I think he would like to give you his advice."

"I should be glad to have it," said Lieutenant King, with befitting gravity, "but I do not think we are in any great danger. And how is your brother?"

"Oh, very well; I mean very ill. Worse than ever. I wish you could take him with you for a cruise or two."

"As they used to take a cask of raw Madeira," said he, laughing heartily, "to fine down? Well, you're right about one thing; there's some good stuff in the lad. He might fine down to something good. But he is not in proper guidance."

"He is in no guidance at all," sighed his mother.

"Is he going abroad with you?"

"Not he," said Miss Beresford. "He wouldn't be bothered with us girls. He will see us as far as Newhaven, perhaps, and make brutal jokes all the way about the Channel."

"You are going soon, then?" said he. Somehow there was a kind of constraint about this young lieutenant's manner. He seemed to be thinking of something or some one else. His remarks and questions were of the most conventional sort.

"On the 1st of September I think we shall be ready to start."

"And are you going far?" he said, in the same preoccupied way.

"To Lucerne, first, I imagine ; and then over the Splügen, when it is cool enough to go into Italy."

"Oh, indeed !" said he. And then he added, after a pause, "Oh, indeed !"

Then he rose.

"I see my man has got back," he said. "I am sorry, Lady Beresford, I cannot ask you to bring your daughters to look over the ship ; we must be off directly. Some other time, perhaps. It would give me very great pleasure, indeed. I hope, Miss Beresford, you will have a pleasant journey. I have been thinking of going abroad myself this autumn if I can get sufficient leave. Will you remember me to your brother Tom ?"

He bade them good-bye, and left. They were silent until they saw him cross over the King's Road. Then the business of criticism began.

"He doesn't talk like a sailor at all," said the Baby, with a pout. "He talks just like anybody."

"At all events he is very good-looking," said Beauty, warmly. "He has the loveliest eyes I ever saw in a man. And his hands—did you notice his gloves ?"

"A sailor shouldn't wear gloves," said the Baby, who had not seen Lieutenant King before, but had heard of him, and was disappointed that he did not correspond to the nautical heroes she had read of.

"I think gold lace is far better on blue than on scarlet," said Beauty. "I think blue and gold looks better than anything in a ball-room."

"He didn't tell us a single wonderful story," said the disappointed Baby.

But Mary Beresford's comment was more odd still. She glanced at her mother, and laughed. "Mother, he didn't even once mention Nan's name."

CHAPTER III.

A FIRST BALL.

NEVERTHELESS, Lieutenant King was quite as well acquainted with Nan Beresford as he was with the other members of the family—and this was how he came to know her. The Beresfords had for many years been the intimate friends of the Strathernes; and though they saw less of each other since Lady Beresford, on becoming a widow, had gone to live permanently in Brighton, still the London season brought them in a measure together again. Lady Beresford took rooms in Bruton Street during the fashionable months of the year for herself and her grown-up daughters; and from time to time, and as a great treat, Nan was allowed to come up for a few days from Brighton. On these rare occasions, if Sir George heard of the Beautiful Wretch being in town, nothing would do but that she should come with her mother and sisters to lunch in Spring Gardens—he being at this time Senior Naval Lord. And Nan was rejoiced. She was

not at all a foolish young virgin ; she was well aware of the affection the old Admiral had for her ; and while she heartily reciprocated it, she knew that his special patronage of her gave her a sort of distinction among her sisters.

Well, one of these opportunities arrived, and Nan, not a little elated, but outwardly very demure, drove away with her mother and sisters, in a hired brougham, to New Street. In due course they arrived at their destination, and they had just got inside the door when, as chance would have it, Sir George himself came from the dining-room into the hall. He was a wiry-looking, handsome, elderly man, with grizzled hair, a firm face, and the kindest of gray eyes ; while on this occasion he was very gorgeously attired, for he had already dressed for a *Levéé*, and, moreover, it was a Collar Day. It was extraordinary to see how naturally Nan went up to him, taking it for granted he would scarcely have a word for anybody else. And he hadn't. Of course he shook hands with Lady Beresford and Mary and Edith, and welcomed them in a kind of way ; but it was Nan that he seized with both hands ; and it was Nan that he himself escorted upstairs to the drawing-room ; and it was Nan that he presented to Lady Stratherne, just as if there was nobody else in the world.

Lady Stratherne, though she was also a miracle of kindness, knew her duties better, and busied herself with the others, leaving those two to themselves.

"Well, now," said the old sailor, briskly, "what is our first dance to be?"

"I beg your pardon, Sir George?" she said.

"Why, don't you know, girl, that you're coming to the ball?"

"What ball, Sir George?" said she, quite innocently.

What ball, indeed! And she had heard her sisters speak of nothing else for a fortnight.

"Why, my ball; our ball, everybody's ball! Why, don't you know that the world is going to stand still on Thursday night—in amazement? And if you didn't know, now you know; and that's the ball you're coming to, as sure as my name is Jack Horner—now, now, I've set my mind on it——"

Nan was no longer a hypocrite. Her heart began to beat rapidly—not with joy, but with fright.

"Oh, Sir George, I—I never was at a ball—I—I never go out—mamma would never dream——"

He turned and sung across the room—

"Mother!"

The lady who was addressed in this homely fashion was herself far from homely : she was a distinguished-looking woman, with pale, refined features and a singularly intelligent and sweet expression.

“Mother, this girl is coming to the ball on Thursday, whether she likes it or not. I want a partner ; I insist on having a partner. Get a card and invite her—a card all to herself—her name in capital letters—the honour of the company of the BEAUTIFUL WRETCH : will that do ? ”

Lady Stratherne said nothing at all, but regarded the other mother with a sort of puzzled smile.

“Oh, Sir George ! ” Lady Beresford protested, “it is impossible. Thank you very much—but it is impossible——”

“Impossible ? ” he cried. “We don’t know what that is at the Admiralty. The men who write in the newspapers expect us to be able to do everything at a moment’s notice ; and of course they’re right ; and so of course we can do it. And so can you ; the end of the argument being that Nan is coming to our ball on Thursday night, as I’m a living Dutchman.”

But the matter was not so easily settled. There was a fierce fight. It was ridiculous that

a schoolgirl, who ought to be walking two and two along the Marine Parade, should go to one of the big balls of the London season. How could a ball-dress be got ready by Thursday night? And so forth : and so forth. Sir George paid no attention to all this firing of cotton pellets. She was coming to the ball on Thursday night, he maintained with a dogged obstinacy worthy of Nelson. And the end of it was that before they went down to lunch it had been finally agreed that Nan was to come to this ball ; her mother remarking to Lady Stratherne, with a sigh of resignation—

“ I can’t imagine what Sir George sees in that gawky child.”

Now, we have it on the best authority—or what ought to be the best authority—that is to say, we have it from a multitude of lady-writers, that the prospect of going to a first ball is one of the great joys of a young girl’s life. The present writer, at all events, is not bold enough to impeach such an array of witnesses, and will only state the simple fact that in the case of Nan Beresford this prospect filled her mind with nothing but terror and dismay. It was in all sincerity that she had besought Sir George to let her off ; though she might as well have gone down on her knees to the Monument. He could not under-

stand why a young girl of seventeen should be really reluctant to go to a dance—and a very pretty dance, too, for the rooms were to be decorated with flags. And when Nan told her mother and sisters that she would far rather not go to the ball, her mother fancied she was afraid that her dress being hurriedly made, would not compare well with her sisters' long-studied costumes, while the sisters simply said to each other, "Oh, she knows she can't dance."

There was some little truth in this last remark. Although she lived in a well-frequented house, where there were plenty of people coming and going, Nan had grown up very much apart. She had her own ways and occupations, which were mostly solitary. And dancing had never been a favourite amusement of hers. Of course, in the evening, when some young people were present, there was frequently a carpet-dance improvised; and then sometimes Nan was dragged in to make up a set at some square dance. She got through it mechanically; but it afforded her no special pleasure; and as for round dances, she said they made her giddy, and so she got excused. Giddy she said; and yet she could walk, without the slightest sensation in the brain, along the extreme verge of those high chalk-cliffs, to watch the jackdaws, and hawks, and gulls at nest-

building time, and she could swing for an hour in a trapèze, so long as the seat was comfortable and you gave her a book to read.

Not that she at all played the part of Cinderella in the house. Her mother was exceedingly fond of her—partly, perhaps, because Nan alone took the trouble to humour all her mysterious nerve-miseries; while her sisters tolerated her, though they thought her unsocial. Even this dress, when it did appear—and a thousand times Nan had inwardly prayed that it might not be ready in time—was quite as pretty as theirs. It was very pretty indeed; but, somehow, Nan, as she regarded herself in the big mirror, convinced herself that there was not enough of her to carry off a ball-dress. Her sisters had a certain “presence” that a grand costume became. She thought she was too thin—that she looked more like a schoolgirl than ever; and she wished that she were not freckled. When, at last, she was in the carriage with the others—Mr. Thomas had gone in a hansom rather than ride with the coachman—she said, cunningly,

“Mamma, dear, I am sure you will be excited with speaking to so many old friends; and you know your nerves cannot stand it. Let me sit by you, and take as much of the talk as I can.

I really don't care to dance. I would rather not dance. I would far rather sit by you, mamma. And I am sure it is not necessary for us to stay long; it will do you such a deal of harm."

Lady Beresford sighed.

"When one has grown-up daughters——," she said almost to herself.

"Mamma, dear," said Nan, eagerly, "would you rather stay at home? Wouldn't you rather stay at home? and I will keep you company——"

"Don't be silly, child," said her eldest sister. "Do you think your dress cost nothing?"

The worst time of all was the waiting in Spring Gardens, where there was a block of carriages. It was all darkness, and expectation, and the hopeless sense that, being imprisoned in this slowly moving line, there was no escape. But when they were once at the entrance, and when Nan got a glimpse at the hall, her courage revived wonderfully. There was such a crowd of people—coming, going, waiting, looking for friends, and arranging dresses—that she felt that she could slip into this self-interested throng, and be lost from observation altogether. She began to be forgetful of herself. When they were going up the stairs she heard names after names announced that she was quite familiar.

with—either through the newspapers or through the conversation at luncheon-tables ; and she was almost anxious to get quickly up to have a glimpse at these celebrated people. When she got to the landing, she did not see Lady Stratherne at all ; for her eyes were filled with wonder at the blaze of light and colour beyond—the draperies of flags, and masses of chandeliers—and she said, under her breath, “ Oh, mamma, isn’t it beautiful ! ” The next thing she heard was “ Nan, dear, how well you are looking ! What beautiful forget-me-nots ! ” and in a startled way she found that she was shaking hands with Lady Stratherne, whose kind eyes were regarding her with a momentary approval. Instinctively, however, she knew from the way that her hostess’s eyes had turned to the next comers—there were far too many loiterers about this landing, and Lady Stratherne had enough to do to prevent a dead block on the stairs—that she need not stay to speak ; so she followed her mother and sisters into the large, brilliantly-lit room. Oh, how glad she was that it was crammed with this dense busily-occupied crowd ! She felt quite safe ; she felt happy ; she was pleased that those few forget-me-nots looked nice. And there was no dancing at all. “ Oh, mamma, tell me who all the people are,” she said.

She began to consider herself quite at home in the middle of such a crowd of strangers ; she had only to be delighted with the blaze of colour, the brilliant costumes, the scent of flowers, the wonders of diamonds.

Momentarily her great good fortune increased. Friends of Lady Beresford began to come round her ; and they made a sort of circle, as it were ; and Nan found she could keep herself just a little bit outside of it, seeing everything, herself unseen. Her cup of happiness was full. She had passed the ordeal unscathed. Why, it was nothing ! All the people were engaged with themselves ; there was not a sound of music ; nothing but a hum of talking, and always that bewildering glow of light and colour, and here and there a figure and face suddenly revealing to her somebody she recognised from photographs and portraits in the illustrated papers. She was becoming quite lost to herself. She could have stood there for ever. She was not thinking of Nan Beresford at all when——

When suddenly there was a long low growl from a violoncello. Her heart sank.

Almost at the same moment she saw another little group—of elderly men, mostly—open out at one corner of the room near her ; and the next thing she knew was that Sir George's keen

eyes had caught sight of her. He was by her side in a second.

"What," said he, "standing all alone? Why, where's Charley? What's Charley about? Lady Beresford, how are you? Ah, Mary? Edith, you are lovelier every day. But where is that rascal Charley? I must find a partner for my sweetheart——"

"Oh, please, Sir George," said Nan, with her heart beating fast.

But by this time there was a noise of preparatory music, and in the middle of the crowd there was something visible like the formation of a double line. At the same instant young Charley Stratherne came hurriedly along, with an eagle eye for possible partners. Him his father instantly seized.

"Where's Frank King? Go and get Frank King. I want Frank King."

And behold, Frank King was at his elbow!

"Sir George——?"

"Oh, that's you, Frank King. Ask this young lady if she will dance with you——"

"Come on, Frank," said the youthful M.C., in his hurried bewilderment of duty. "You'll just do. Let me introduce you to Miss Anne Beresford. Lieutenant King. They want a couple at the other end."

So he disappeared in the crowd; and Nan found herself in the possession of this young naval officer, who seemed to take matters very coolly, considering that they were wanted right at the top of the spacious assembly-room. Happily, she heard from the music that it was the Lancers that was about to begin; so she was not entirely dismayed.

"I suppose we shall get through somehow," said he, surveying the close mass of people with the eye of a strategist. The clearing of the space in the middle had naturally made the surrounding crowd denser.

"I think it will be difficult," said she, timidly.

"Well, we can try this end," said he, about to lead her in that direction.

"Oh!" she said, very earnestly, "I am sure we shall only embarrass them if we have another set at this end. And—and—I am not anxious to dance the Lancers. I would as soon not," she said.

Then for the first time it seemed that he turned towards her; and as she happened to be looking up at him to impress on him that she would as soon not dance, she instantaneously lowered her eyes and sought refuge in the little scented programme.

"Perhaps," said he, after the fifteenth part of

a second, "perhaps you would give me a dance that you like better."

Her innocent answer was to hand him her programme, upon which there was as yet not a scrap of writing. So, when that matter was arranged, he said to her,

"Would you like to see this dance, then? It's very pretty, when you are at a little distance. And I know how to get to that recess there; it's raised a few inches, you know; and I think you could see."

"Oh! I should like that!" she said. How grateful she was to him!

They made their way to this side recess, which had been built out, temporarily, from the drawing-room, for the sake of additional space. It was decorated with trailing-plants, trained on trellis-work; and two or three circles of red candles, amid so much green foliage, had a pretty effect. There were a few people standing about and looking on at the dancing, or talking; it was possible to talk, for here the music was softened.

Nan's companion led her to a raised bench, from which she could see very well; but even as she sat down, and while she was so glad to have been relieved from dancing out there amid all those people, she was touched by some strange

misgivings. It was her duty to have danced. She had been presented with a partner; and if only she had not shown herself reluctant, she knew very well he could have found places for them. Were not officers always fond of dancing? And then it suddenly occurred to her that she ought to try to make him some amends. She ought to entertain him with brilliant conversation, as it were. Meanwhile, what was he doing? Not thinking of her—except as a booby, a child who could not talk. No doubt he was looking out at all those beautiful women there, and wishing he was not imprisoned in this corner.

Nan timidly raised her eyes, and instantly dropped them again. He had been for the moment looking at the forget-me-nots in her hair.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SAME.

NAN was growing desperate. Speak she must, if only to let him know that she was sensible of his kindness in affording her this blissful relief; for she believed it was entirely on her account that he had proposed to sit out the dance. So she said, wildly,

“You go to a great many balls, I suppose?”

“Oh, dear no,” he said. “I am not much ashore.”

Of course. She might have known. Was there not an air of command about him, young as he was? No doubt he held far too important a position to waste time on idle entertainments.

“I mean earlier—as a midshipman,” she stammered. “You must have been to many places, and—and—I thought the life of a midshipman was nothing but parties and balls, along with a great deal of mischief. That is what one reads, you know, about the young gentlemen—always

tumbling into trouble, and always getting happily out of it, and always amusing themselves just as much as they amuse others."

This was not so bad. Nan's face had brightened; she regarded him with her clear eyes.

"You are thinking of Captain Marryat," said he, laughing. "But times have changed sadly for the middy since then. It isn't all beer and skittles now. Nowadays, the poor chap can scarcely call his soul his own; and if he is going in for his Three Ones——"

"I beg your pardon; what is that?" she said, with a grave interest.

"Trifling little things," said he, jocosely. "Only first-class certificates in gunnery, seamanship, and mathematics; then, to finish up with, the unhappy youth has to look forward to an interview or two with the hydrographer, who isn't at all a gentleman to be made a fool of."

How was it that she knew instinctively that this young officer had got his Three Ones—nay, that he had carried them off easily, triumphantly? What was there in his manner, or the shape of his forehead, or his expression, that rendered her perfectly certain that he had nothing to fear from all the hydrographers ever born?

"Why, even in my time, I can remember

when the middy was allowed a good deal more law," he continued ; and now he had sat down beside her, and her eyes met his quite frankly. " I remember a fearful scene at Cherbourg, at a ball there ; that was when the fleet went over, and there was a great round of festivities. Well, this ball, I think, was given by the Mayor—I am not quite sure ; but, at all events, the midship-mites were invited with the rest, and those who could get leave went of course. Well, we had the run of the refreshment-room, and we used it. There was far too much champagne, and all our seniors were in the ball-room,—the Duke of Somerset, and the whole of them,—so we set to work to chaff the waiters in unknown tongues. Anything more patient or friendly than the conduct of these amiable creatures I never saw. They entirely entered into the spirit of the thing, and grinned and nodded in high glee when we inquired about their mothers and sisters—in English, of course ; and then we tried bad French on them, and Welsh, with a touch of Lancashire thrown in ; and then they grinned all the more, and shrugged their shoulders. My chum Greville was the worst, I think ; he kept asking for all sorts of ridiculous things, and was very angry when he couldn't get them. '*Avez-vous du vin de Cockalorum?*' he asked of one

fellow : of course Greville spoke real true-blue English-French. ‘*Coque-a-lorrrrrme?*’ said the waiter. ‘*Je crois que non, Monsieur——*’ ‘*Pourquoi n’avez-vous pas du vin de Cockalorum?*’ said Greville, with great indignation. ‘*C’est une chose monstrueuse. Nous sommes les invités de la grande nation Française ; nous sommes les officiers de sa Majesté la Reine d’Angleterre ; et vous n’avez pas du vin de Cockalorum !*’ There was enough of other wine, at all events,” added Frank King. “I am afraid there was a good deal of headache next morning among the younger officers of her Majesty’s fleet.”

“Weren’t you afraid,” said Nan, who had forgotten what shyness was by this time ; “weren’t you afraid the French might be tempted to take a mean advantage and capture the fleet bodily ?”

“It would have been no more mean advantage,” said he, with a laugh, “than we used to take in fighting them when they were seasick.”

“Sailors sea-sick ?” she exclaimed.

“Yes, that’s just where it was,” he said, and the friendly interest he displayed in this young lady was very wonderful. Already they seemed to have known each other for a quite indefinite time. “Mind you, people laugh nowadays at

the old belief that one English sailor was as good as seven French ones. But it was quite true ; and the explanation is simple enough. The fact was that the English kept such a strict blockade of the French ports that the French sailors never had a proper chance of finding their sea legs. They never got out. When they did come out they had to fight ; and how can you expect a sea-sick man to fight ? But I was talking of that chum of mine, Greville. He was the coolest hand I ever came across. Once he and I—when we were mids, you know—had to go down by rail from Genoa to Spezia——”

At this moment the music slowly ceased ; and the kaleidoscopic groups out there, that had been going through all sorts of interminglings and combinations, lost cohesion, as it were, and melted away into the murmuring and amorphous crowd. Miss Nan knew very well that she ought now to return to her mamma ; but how was she to break in upon this story ? When one has already begun to tell you something, more particularly when that something is about himself and an old companion—and especially if you do not wish to be perplexed with invitations to dance—it is not polite to interrupt.

So the young lieutenant, taking no notice whatever of the cessation of the dancing, continued

his story, and told several more, which Miss Nan found intensely interesting—so absorbing, indeed, that she met the eyes of her companion without any abashment, and frequently laughed in her low, quiet way. These two seemed very friendly, and heedless of what was going on around them; and might, in fact, have continued talking for a quite indefinite time, had not, all of a sudden, Charley Stratherne come up, followed by a tall man with a long yellow beard; and before Nan knew what had happened, she was being led away to pierce the great throng that had now grown very dense indeed, a waltz having already begun. As for the young lieutenant, he somewhat abruptly declined his friend's offer to find him a partner.

“You have plenty of dancing men; there won't be room to move shortly.”

Charley Stratherne was too busy to stay and ask why his friend refused to dance, and would not even remain in the ball-room; the next second he was off. Then the young lieutenant managed to make his way through the crowd to the door; and as there were still plenty of people arriving, he succeeded in passing his hostess unobserved and making his way downstairs.

He entered the brilliantly-decorated but quite empty supper-room, and sat down. One of the

servants happened to come in and stared at him.

"Look here," said he, "could you get me an evening paper?"

"Oh yes, sir," said the man: and he went off and speedily returned with the newspaper.

Frank King sat down, turned his back to the table, and was soon all by himself in this long chamber, apparently deeply absorbed in the evening's news. What he really was doing, however, was listening to the music overhead.

Meanwhile, Nan got through the waltz somehow. The crush was so great that her partner, who was not much of a pilot, generally succeeded in steering her into some little side bay, where they came slowly to rest by mere friction, or else landed her right in the middle of the room, where there was a throng of unskilful dancers become stationary in spite of themselves. At last she was surrendered again to her mother's care.

"Well, Nan," said Lady Beresford, with an amused look, "how did you get on?"

"You mean how much did I get off?" said she. "I believe I'm all in rags. And that elephant of a man bumped me against every person in the room."

Here the Admiral came along—bustling as

was his wont, talking to everybody at the same time, and invariably putting his hand on the shoulder of those whom he knew best, to give effect to his speech.

"Well, well, my girl," he said, "how did you like your partner? Did he amuse you? Did he compliment you on the roses in your cheeks—ah, that's the Brighton air, that is."

"Oh, if you mean Lieutenant King," said Nan, without any hesitation or embarrassment, "I think he is very amusing indeed—very. And very clever, too, is he not?"

"Oh, yes, he's a smart young fellow—a smart young fellow is Frank King. We've had an eye on him for some time back."

"I should say now," remarked Nan, with a wise air, "that he had got his Three Ones?"

The Admiral stared at her, and then burst out laughing.

"You young impertinence! What do you know about the Three Ones? He had got his certificates before he was one-and-twenty. But here, I will tell you something."

He took her a step aside.

"Hush, now—hush-sh. It is a State secret. Don't say a word. But I'll tell you what we're going to do with Frank King to-morrow; we're going to give him the command of the *Fly-by-*

Night. What do you think of that for a lieutenant of five-and-twenty ? ”

“ If he has relatives, I suppose they will be very proud,” said Nan.

“ Relatives ? Don’t you know the Kings of Kingscourt ? But there now, I mustn’t keep you talking ; I suppose you’re engaged for every dance. Mind you are down at supper while I’m there ; I will drink a glass of wine to the roses in your cheeks——”

And so he was off again before she could say, as she greatly wished to say——“ Oh, Sir George, I would rather talk to you than have to do any more dancing. Surely there are enough people dancing.”

Then she looked round the room for some considerable time. At last she said to herself, contentedly,

“ Yes, I thought he was too clever-looking to care about dancing, and I don’t wonder he has gone home. But it would have been nice if I had had the chance to tell him he was going to have the command of the *Fly-by-Night*.”

CHAPTER V.

THE SAME.

THE night passed quickly, and amid all this bewilderment of music and dancing and introductions, Nan very soon forgot even the existence of the young Lieutenant whose acquaintance she had made. Moreover, the succession of these rapid excitements left no room for anything resembling stage-fright—although, it is true, each time the band began anew she felt a little throb. But Lady Stratherne, who had now all her guests assembled, was so indefatigable in seeing that Nan should not be left neglected, and the dancing in this crowd was so much a matter of experiment and accident, and the fact that she was introduced to one or two partners who seemed no more expert than herself, was so reassuring, that on the whole Nan was very much delighted in her demure way, and that delight showed itself in her face and in her clear, bright eyes. Her hair was a little wild, and she had lost some of her forget-me-nots, and there were one or two

flying tags that had got dissociated from the skirt of her dress; but was not that all part of the play? Nan's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were pleased and bright; the only thing that troubled her in this whirl of excitement was an occasional qualm about her mother. Had she not promised to keep the poor mamma company? But a time would come, and then she would make amends by being particularly affectionate.

The time did come. On consulting the programme Nan found opposite the next dance a scrawl that might be made out to be "F. H. King;" and then she bethought herself of the young sailor. Well, he had left. That was very opportune. She would devote the time of this dance to her mother, and take her into the tea-room, and ask which of her old friends she had met, and even offer to go home with her if she felt fatigued.

"Mamma," she said to Lady Beresford, "don't you think I've done enough? England can't expect you to do more than your duty, even with all those flags overhead. Come away, and I will get you some tea, though what would be better for you still would be some B. and S."

"Nan, how dare you!" said her mother, angrily, and glancing round at the same time. "You

may use such expressions, if you like, when you are with your brother. Pray don't disgrace the whole family when you are elsewhere."

"Mamma, dear," said Nan contritely, "it is madness, pure madness. The excitement of my first ball has got into my brain——"

"Into your what?" said her mother, with a smile. Nan, and Nan alone, could pacify her in a second.

At the same moment the band began again; and somehow Nan, looking up, found before her some one who was no other than the young Lieutenant she had met at the beginning of the evening. She was somewhat bewildered by this Jack-in-the-box sort of appearance.

"I think you promised me this next dance, Miss Beresford," said he. He was a grave-looking young man for his years—a Corsican Brother—the Ghost in *Hamlet*. She did not know what to make of him.

"I thought you had left," she stammered. "You have not been dancing?"

"No, I have not been dancing," he repeated.

"I will come back to you soon, mamma," she said, and she put her hand on his arm, and moved away with him.

"The fact is," said he, "I don't like much being introduced to strangers. Most girls stare

at you so, with a sort of hold-off air, and it is so difficult to get on pleasant and friendly terms with them."

"I should not have thought you were so shy," said Nan, with an honest laugh.

He flushed a little, and said—

"If you've lived most of your life on board ship, you may feel a little bit awkward; but mind," he added with some eagerness, "sometimes, not often (once in half a dozen years, maybe), you meet with a girl who is quite different from the others, quite different. You know it at once from her manner, and you can make friends with her with the greatest ease, simply because she is intelligent and quick in appreciation, and not affected in her ways, or stiff."

This eager encomium passed upon an imaginary person struck Nan as being somewhat out of place, for the waltz had already begun, and she wanted to get back to her mamma: whereas this Lieutenant King seemed to wish to stand there and talk to her.

"Of course, that's special good luck for a sailor," said he with a smile, "to be able to make friends in a short time; for it's only a short time he has. Ashore to-day, and off to-morrow again; and what's worse, out of sight out of mind."

"Oh, not always," said Nan, cheerfully.

"Oh yes, it is," he said ; " people on shore are too much concerned among themselves to think about the people away at sea. Why, you yourself now ; after you leave this house to-night you will completely forget that there are such things as either ships or sailors until you come back here to another ball, and then the bunting will remind you."

"Now there you are quite wrong," said she firmly, "for I see ships and sailors every day of my life."

"Why, how is that ?" he exclaimed with great interest.

"We live in Brighton," said Nan simply, "and I walk a good deal along the downs towards Newhaven, you know. The ships are a good way off, generally ; still, you watch them, and you are interested in them."

"You walk along the downs between Brighton and Newhaven ?" he said, as if that was an extraordinary matter. "Alone ?"

"Usually."

"When I am passing I will look out for you ; I will imagine that I can see you."

Nan thought this was idle talk, so she said with a smile,

"Shall we give up this dance too ? The fact

is, I want to take mamma and get her some tea, or an ice, or something."

"Oh, don't do that!" said he, eagerly; "introduce me to her, and I will take you both down to supper. There are some people there already——"

"But I must not go down—not yet," said Nan, remembering her youth.

"Why not?" said he boldly. "I know Lady Stratherne well enough for anything. Why, nothing could be more natural. Of course you will come down with your mamma."

"I'm very hungry, and that's the truth," said Nan; "for I was too excited or frightened to think about dinner. But if I went down now, wouldn't they think it was a little bit——"

She was about to say "cheeky," but she remembered in time that this was not her brother. He broke in abruptly—

"Never mind what any one thinks; come away, Miss Beresford, and introduce me to your mamma."

Then he looked at the various couples rapidly moving round that open space to the sound of the seductive music, and he said, rather wistfully—

"Don't you think we might have one turn? I shall not dance again this evening."

“ Oh yes, certainly, if you wish it,” she said, quite blithely ; and she gave him her fan to hold, and arranged her train, and a couple of seconds thereafter they were lost in that slowly circling whirlpool of muslin and silk and satin.

When they came out of it again he was introduced to Lady Beresford, and although he was quite anxiously humble and courteous to the elder lady, he would hear of nothing but that she and Nan should forthwith go downstairs to supper. By and by there would be too great a crush. It was a kindness to Lady Stratherne to go before everybody else wanted a place. And Miss Anne was hungry, which was a great matter.

Lady Beresford looked at Nan, but that young lady was unconscious. The end of it was that these three very speedily found themselves below, in the supper-room, where as yet there were only a number of elderly people who had grown tired of the duties of chaperoning. And they had scarcely sat down when Frank King, who was most assiduous in his attentions to Lady Beresford, and scarcely saw Nan at all, discovered that the mamma knew certain relatives of his, and knew all about his own family, and had even on one occasion visited Kingscourt a good many years ago. Lady Beresford was very kind

to him. He was a pleasant-mannered, clever-looking young man, and he had a distinguished air that lent value to the little courtesies he paid. She even said, as they were talking of chance meetings and the like, that she would be glad if he called on them while she and her daughters were in London.

“May I be allowed to call on you at Brighton, some day, Lady Beresford?” he said quickly. “The fact is, my leave is out; I have to rejoin my ship at Portsmouth to-morrow.”

At this Nan pricked up her ears. She suddenly remembered that to her had been entrusted the covert intelligence of his promotion. But was it necessary it should be kept so great a secret, she asked herself, rather breathlessly, and with her heart beginning to beat quickly? If he were to know on the morrow, why not now? It would make him very happy; it would indeed add a few hours of happiness to his life; and surely Sir George Stratherne, who was the very soul of kindness, would rather approve?

Well, she let these two talk on for a time; she wished to be discreet; she wished to be less nervous. For was it not a great event in the career of a young man? And how might he take it? She said to herself, “The old monarchs used to kill the messengers who brought them

bad news, and they used to give heaps of presents to those who brought them good news. I am glad I shall be able to tell him of his promotion, for he has been so excessively kind to mamma."

She waited her opportunity.

"Oh, Lieutenant King, do you know a ship called the *Fly-by-Night*?" she said, quite casually, and in an off-hand way.

"Yes," he said, regarding her with some surprise. "She's what they call a school-brig—a training-brig. I think she's at Plymouth."

"A training-brig?" said Nan, innocently. "Then they want a clever officer, I suppose, to be in command of a training-brig."

"Yes, they want a smart fellow," said he, without any great interest; and he was about to turn to Lady Beresford again when Nan continued—

"Would it—would it surprise you if you heard you were to be transferred to the *Fly-by-Night*?"

"I shouldn't like to hear of it," said he, laughing; "I am satisfied where I am."

"But I mean to command her."

"I'm afraid that's a long way off yet," said he, lightly.

"Oh no, it isn't," said Nan timorously. "I

am sure it is no great secret—you will know to-morrow—you are to be appointed to-morrow to the command of the *Fly-by-Night*."

His face flushed a deep red.

"You are joking, Miss Beresford."

"Oh no, I am not," said Nan, hastily. "Sir George told me to-night; I am not joking at all——Captain King," said she, at a wild venture.

For an instant she saw his under lip quiver. He sat quite silent. Then he said—

"That is Sir George's doing—if it is possible."

He had scarcely uttered the words when the Admiral himself appeared, bringing in a little old lady with a portentous head-dress. Nan instantly conjectured that she must be a dowager-duchess, for she thought that no one but a dowager-duchess would dare to wear such a thing.

Sir George paused as he passed them.

"Hillo, here's my sweetheart. I told you I wanted to drink a glass of wine with you. Doing your duty, Frank King? When's your leave out?"

"I am going down to Portsmouth to-morrow, Sir George."

"No, no; you'll have a message from the

Admiralty to-morrow. I didn't see you dancing to-night ; you young fellows are getting lazy."

He passed on. Nan looked triumphantly across the corner of the table. Frank King said—laughing off his embarrassment—

"I have a vague impression that I ought to thank you for it, Miss Beresford ; and I don't know how. I hope it is true. They never gave me a hint of it. You would have thought Charley Stratherne would have known."

"It was very imprudent of my daughter," said Lady Beresford, severely, "to mention such a thing ; but Sir George makes a pet of her, and I hope no harm has been done."

Frank King warmly protested. How could any harm be done ? And he redoubled his attentions to Lady Beresford. Not only that, but when they returned to the ball-room he was very anxious to be introduced to Nan's sisters, and was most polite to them, though he did not ask them for a dance. Moreover, he got hold of Charley Stratherne, and through him made the acquaintance of Mr. Tom Beresford ; and these three, having adjourned for a time to a certain remote snugery where were sherry and soda and cigarettes, Frank King was quite content to accept from Mr. Tom hints concerning things about town. There was in especial a famous

“lion comique”—the Great Dunse, or the Jolly Ass, or some such creature—about whom Mr. Tom was much exercised; and Frank King professed himself quite interested in hearing about this person. The grave young Lieutenant was indeed extraordinarily complaisant this evening. He was unusually talkative—when he was not a most attentive listener. You would have thought that he had acquired a sudden admiration for the brilliant social qualities of Mr. Tom, and that he had never heard such good stories before.

Well, the Beresfords left about three; and that was the end of Nan's first ball. On the whole she had every reason to be pleased. She had acquitted herself fairly well; she had gratified the soft-hearted old Admiral; she hadn't fallen in love with anybody; and she had seen a number of celebrated persons in whom she was interested. She thought she had done a kindness, too, in telling Lieutenant King beforehand of his appointment.

She was surprised, however, and a little bit annoyed when, on the afternoon of the next day but one, her brother Tom brought in this same Frank King to five o'clock tea. He said, with something of a blush, that he wished to tell her that her news had been true; he had heard from

the Admiralty that morning, and he wished to thank her. Nan was somewhat cold in her manner ; she had thought with some pride that he was not like the other gentlemen who came about the house in the afternoon. She had seen enough of them and their idleness, and aimless flirtations, and languid airs. She had taken Frank King to be of firmer stuff, and not likely to waste his time at afternoon teas.

He was kind and polite enough, no doubt, and he distributed his attentions in the most impartial manner—even including two young lady visitors to whom he was introduced ; but Nan seized an early opportunity of slipping away to her own room, where she resumed certain very serious studies that occupied her mind at this time. When she came downstairs again Lieutenant King was gone.

On the following day her holiday ended, and she went down to Brighton. Many a time she thought of the ball, and always with a pleasurable recollection. When, however, she happened to think of Frank King—and it was seldom—it was always with a slight touch of disappointment. No doubt his leave was extended ; probably he was still in town, and repeating those afternoon calls in Bruton Street. As for Nan, she honestly did not care to which train of

admirers he might attach himself—whether he was to be Mary's captive or Edith's slave. But she was disappointed.

“I did think he was a little bit different from the others,” she would say to herself; and then she would turn to Mr. Lockyer's last discoveries in spectrum analysis.

CHAPTER VI.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

“NAN, do you see that ship out there?” said Mary Beresford.

“I saw it as I came along,” said Nan. This was the afternoon on which she had fallen in with Singing Sal. Nan was rather tired after her long walk, and was not inclined to show much interest in that now lessening vessel, which was lowly sinking into the dusk of the west.

“Do you know what her name is?” said Mary Beresford, still regarding her younger sister.

“No,” said Nan. “I heard people say she was a man-of-war.”

“That is the *Fly-by-Night*.”

“Oh, indeed,” said Nan, with no greater interest than before.

“And Lieutenant King has just called here,” the elder sister said, pointedly.

“Oh, indeed,” said Nan. “I wish I had been in ; I should like to have seen him in uniform.”

That was all she said, and all she thought ; for now there were far more serious things than ball-rooms and young lieutenants occupying Nan's attention. She and her sisters were going abroad—she for the first time ; and she was busy with foreign languages, and lives of the great painters, and catalogues, and guide-books, and dressing-cases. The world she hoped to plunge into on the following week was, in her imagination, composed of nothing but cathedrals and picture-galleries ; and she could have wished that the picture-galleries might contain nothing but the labours of Botticelli and Andrea del Sarto. The clear ethereal beauty and tenderness of the one, the solemn thoughtfulness of the other : these were things that filled her mind with a mysterious gladness, as if something had been added to her own life. Rubens she cordially hated. Of Titian she had as yet seen hardly anything.

At last the wonderful day of setting out arrived, and Mr. Tom graciously consented to accompany his sisters as far as Newhaven. It was towards the afternoon that they started, in an open carriage, the maid on the box beside the coachman. Tom was making facetious remarks about south-west gales, and his two elder sisters were angrily remonstrating with him. Nan was

silent. She had not a thought for the ships and sailors out there, or for any pensive young officer bitterly saying to himself that out of sight was out of mind; and she had forgotten for a moment all about Singing Sal and her free and easy ways. Nan's mind was at this time filled with Dante, and Florence, and the young Raphael, and the Doge wedding the Adriatic, and Pompeii, and Savonarola, and goodness knows what else. When they reached Newhaven—when they forced her to descend from the carriage—her eyes had a bewildered look. She had not seen Newhaven at all. She had been watching the execution of Savonarola—she standing in the middle of the great crowd in a square in Florence.

They stayed the night at the hotel at Newhaven. Next morning falsified all Mr. Tom's malicious forecasts; the weather was fine, and they had a smooth passage across. In due time they reached Paris.

To Nan, Paris meant picture-galleries. The streets were new-looking, non-historical, filled with common-place people; but in the picture-galleries she was with great names, in great times.

“Nan,” her sisters remonstrated, “what is the use of dawdling over pictures like this? The Old Masters are all alike. There are plenty of

Holy Families and broken-necked angels in England. Why don't you put off all this till you get back to the National Gallery?"

Fortunately, Nan was the most biddable of companions. She seemed to be in dreamland. You could do what you liked with her if only you allowed her to gaze with her great eyes, and think, and be silent.

Now it is unnecessary to follow in detail the various journeyings and adventures of these three young ladies and their maid; we may pass on to a certain evening when they found themselves in Lucerne. It was an exceedingly hot evening; and after dinner the crowd in this great hotel had been glad to pour out into the spacious verandah, which was formed by a succession of arches all hanging with evergreens. There they formed little groups round the small tables, lit up by the orange glow streaming out from the windows of the hotel, some taking coffee, some smoking, all chatting idly.

"It feels like thunder," said Mary Beresford to her sister Edith. "It would be odd if we were to have a real thunderstorm just after listening to the imitation one in the Cathedral."

"The *vox humana* stop is better at some things than at others," said Miss Edith, critically. "In the chanting the boys' voices are good, and the

tenor voices are good ; but the bass is too musical. You hear that it is the organ. And it vibrates too much."

"They must make a good deal of money by it," said the elder sister, "in the tourist season. I am sure there were a hundred people there."

"I wish I knew the name of the piece. I should like to try one or two of the airs."

"It was considerate of them to finish up in time to let us get back for the *table d'hôte*."

"Sooner or later that organ will shake the Cathedral to bits : the vibrations were fearful. I thought there was a great deal too much noise. You lose effect when you pile up the agony like that : people only want to stop their ears to prevent their heads being split."

So they chatted on. But what was it that Nan, who had accompanied them, had heard as she sat in the great, empty, dimly-lit Cathedral, with her hands clasped, her head bent forward on them, her eyes closed ? Or, rather, what was it that she saw ?—for this seemed to be a picture in music. She saw a small chapel far away up in the mountains, the trembling red rays in the windows looking strange above the snow. She heard the monks at their midnight chanting—low, and sad, and distant. And then it seemed, as she listened, as if the stars over-

head were being blurred out, and a murmuring wind came down the gorge, and the air grew cold. The darkness deepened; the wind rose and moaned through the pine forest; then an angry gust swept along, so that the intoning of the monks was lost altogether. There was a rumble of distant thunder—overhead, among the unseen peaks. But still, unconscious of the threatening storm, those within the small building went on with their holy office, and there were snatches of the clear singing of boys—so faint that you could scarcely hear; and again the strong, sad, sombre voices of the men. Then the tempest broke, fierce and terrible: the elements seemed mingled together. She lost sight of the chapel in the whirling snow; the heavens rattled overhead; and the wind swept down so that the whole earth trembled. A horror of wrath and darkness has overwhelmed the world; and what of the patient choristers now? No longer are their voices heard amid the appalling fury of the hurricane; the sudden lightning-flash reveals nothing in the blackness; the powers of evil have overcome; and the universe has lost its hope. But now there comes a lull; and suddenly—far away, and faint, and triumphant—rises the song of reliance and joy. The demons of the night mutter and moan; but

the divine song rises clearer and more clear. It is the voice of faith, silver-toned and sweet ; and the very heavens themselves seem to listen ; and the thunders rumble away into the valleys ; and the stars, shining, and calm, and benignant, come out again over the mountain-peaks. And lo ! once more she can descry the faint red rays above the snow ; and she can almost see the choristers within the little building ; and she listens to the silver-clear song ; and her heart is filled with a strange new gladness and trust. What must she do to keep it there for ever ? By what signal self-sacrifice—by what devotion of a whole life-time—by what patient and continuous duty—shall she secure to herself this divine peace, so that the storms and terrors and trials of the world may sweep by it powerless and unregarded ?

When she rose and blindly followed her sisters, she was all trembling, and there was a great lump in her throat. She was, indeed, in that half-hysterical state in which rash resolves are sometimes made that may determine the course of a human life. But Nan had the sense to know that she was in this state ; and she had enough firmness of character to enable her to reason with herself. She walked, silent, with her sisters from the Cathedral to the hotel ; and

she was reasoning with herself all the time. She was saying to herself that she had had a glimpse, an impression of something divinely beautiful and touching, that at some time or other might influence or even determine her course of life. When that time came she could remember. But not now—*not now*. She was not going to resolve to become a Catholic, or join a sisterhood, or give herself up to the service of the poor, merely because this wonderful music had filled her heart with emotion. It was necessary that she should think of something hard and practical—something that would be the embodiment of common sense. She would force herself to think of that. And, casting about, she determined to think—about Singing Sal!

It was rather hard upon Sal, who had a touch of vanity, and was quite conscious of what she deemed the romantic side of her way of life, that she should be taken as the sort of incarnation of the prosaic. Nevertheless, all through that *table d'hôte* dinner, Nan kept to her self-imposed task, and was busying herself about the wages of the coastguardsmen, and the probable cost of mackerel, and the chances of Sal's having to face a westerly squall of wind and rain when she was breasting the steep hill rising from Newhaven. Was Sal singing that night before the Old Ship?

Or was she in the little *cul-de-sac* near the Town-hall where the public-house was that the fishermen called in at on their way home? Nan was apparently dining at the *table d'hôte* of a hotel in Lucerne; but in reality she spent that evening in Brighton.

And she was still thinking of Brighton when, as has been related, there was a migration from the dining-saloon to the verandah outside; so that she did not hear much of what her sisters were saying.

"We are certainly going to have a real thunderstorm after the imitation one," Miss Beresford repeated. "Do you hear that?"

There was a low rumble of thunder; likewise some pattering of rain-drops on the leaves outside.

"It won't be half as fine though," said the musical sister.

There was a sudden white flash of light that revealed in a surprising manner the sharp outline of Pilatus; then darkness and a crashing peal of thunder. The rain began to pour; and some passers-by took shelter under the densely-foliaged trees fronting the gravelled terrace of the hotel. The light that came through the tall windows fell on those dark figures; but dimly.

Nan had been thinking so much of Brighton, and Sal, and the downs, and ships and sailors, that when this orange glow fell on a gentleman whom she thought she recognised as Lieutenant Frank King she was scarcely astonished. She looked hard through the dusk; yes, surely it was he.

"Mary," she said, but without any great interest, "isn't that Lieutenant King standing by that farthest tree?"

The eldest sister also peered through the obscurity.

"Well, yes, it is. What an extraordinary thing! Oh, I remember, he said he was going abroad. But what a curious coincidence! Why don't you go and speak to him, Nan?"

"Why should I go and speak to him?" said Nan. "I should only get wet."

"What can have brought him here?" said Edith.

"Not his ship, at all events," said Mary Beresford, smartly. "It's only Shakspeare who can create seaports inland."

"You ought to know better than that," said Nan with some asperity, for she was very valiant in protecting her intellectual heroes against the attacks of a flippant criticism. "You ought to know that at one time the Kingdom of Bohemia

had seaports on the Adriatic : every schoolgirl knows that nowadays."

"They didn't when I was at school," said Mary Beresford. "But aren't you going to speak to Lieutenant King, Nan?"

"Oh, he won't want to be bothered with a lot of girls," said Nan ; and she refused to stir.

A few seconds thereafter, though there was still an occasional flash of lightning, the rain slackened somewhat ; and the young Lieutenant—who was clad in a travelling-suit of gray, by-the-way, and looked remarkably like the other young Englishmen loitering about the front of the hotel—emerged from his shelter, shook the rain-drops from his sleeves, and passed on into the dark.

The very next morning the Beresfords left Lucerne for Zurich. They stayed there three days—Nan busy all the time in teaching herself how to propel a boat with two oars, her face to the bow ; and she liked to practise most in moonlight. Then they left Zurich one afternoon, and made their way southward into the mountainous region adjacent to the sombre Walensee. The stormy sunset deepened and died out ; rain, rain, rain pursued them all the way to Chur. They got to their hotel there in an omnibus that jolted through the mud and the darkness.

But next morning, when Nan Beresford went to the window of the little sitting-room and looked abroad, she uttered a cry of surprise that was also meant as a call to wake her sleeping sisters. She stepped out on to a wooden balcony, and found herself poised high above the flooded river that was roaring down its channel, while in front of her was the most vivid and brilliant of pictures, the background formed by a vast semi-circle of hills. She had it all to herself on this lovely morning—the fresh air and sunlight; the plunging river below; the terraced gardens on the opposite bank; over that again, the tumbled about collection of gleaming white houses, and green casements, and red roofs, and old towers and belfries; and then, higher still, and enclosing, as it were, the picturesque little town, the great ethereal amphitheatre of pale blue mountains, with here and there a sprinkling of snow glittering sharply, as if it were quite close at hand. How fresh and cold the morning air was, after the sultry atmosphere of the lakes! How beautiful the snow was! Nan did not like to be alone. She wished to share her delight with some one. “Edith! Edith!” she called. There was no answer.

Suddenly she found she was no longer the solitary possessor of this brilliant little picture.

Happening to turn her head somewhat, she perceived some one coming across the bridge ; and, after a minute's surprise and doubt and astonishment, she convinced herself that the stranger was no other than Frank King. The discovery startled her. This time it could be no mere coincidence. Surely he was following them ? Could it be possible that he had come with bad news from Brighton ?

She did not stay to waken her sisters. She hastily put on her hat and went downstairs ; and the first person she saw was Lieutenant King himself, who was calmly looking over the list of arrivals.

CHAPTER VII.

AUF DER REISE.

THE frank, clear, dark-blue eyes of this young Lieutenant were expressive enough ; they said a good deal more than he did, when he happened to turn and catch sight of her. He, indeed, was surprised and embarrassed ; it was only his eyes that dared to say, " Oh, how glad I am to have found you ! "

" You have no bad news ? " she said, quickly. " There is no one ill at Brighton ? "

" Oh, no, " he said, wondering.

Relieved from her sudden fear, she paused, as it were to take breath. Her first thought was that her hair was far from being properly dressed. Her next that it was annoying to find the commanding officer of one of her Majesty's vessels lounging about the Continent like an ordinary tourist. But even in this costume she had to admit to herself that he looked handsome, and clever, and distinguished ; moreover, he was so clearly glad to see her, that she must needs be civil.

"I saw you at Lucerne—for a moment," she said. "And when I saw you again just now from the window, I thought you might have a message for us."

"Oh, no," he said. "But I—I—half expected to meet you somewhere. Your sister said you were going over the Splügen Pass."

"But what have you done with your ship?" she asked, still regarding that tourist costume with disapproval.

"I am my own master now," he said; "I can take my leave any time of the year I like; and, of course, just now all one's friends are on the Continent, and—and—a sailor has so few chances of making friends that he doesn't like to lose them——"

"Then you are with a party?" she said, in her downright way.

"No," said he, rather confusedly. "I—I am alone, as it happens. I thought I should like to have a short time in Italy——You see, I have never been over one of the passes; and they say the Splügen is very fine."

"Oh, you are going over the Splügen?" she said, with wide eyes.

"Yes," he said, unblushingly. "I suppose you and your sisters will be starting from here to-morrow or next day?"

"We start this morning at half-past ten," said Nan.

"How very odd!" he exclaimed. "I have got the chance of a return carriage that also leaves this morning."

"I thought 'gentlemen walked,'" said Nan, severely, "when they wished to see mountain scenery."

"When they have time I suppose they do," he answered. "But I have only a few days. I must get back to my ship."

"I can't understand yet how you have left her," said Nan. "I thought you would take such a pride in your own ship. And what need have you of miscellaneous friends when you have your brother officers?"

"Ward-room talk is apt to become monotonous. Besides, the *Fly-by-Night* is in dock just now; and I needn't get back until the repairs are done."

"Well," said Nan, who hoped she had not been rude, "the Splügen Pass doesn't belong to me, and I have no right to object to your crossing."

"Well, that is very kind of you," said he, laughing; and then he said more seriously, "but don't think I am likely to take any offence, Miss Beresford. I see quite clearly what you mean; and it is very kind of you to take any interest

in the—in the ship. And I wish you would let me send you a photograph of her ; they say it is very well done : it is so difficult, don't you know——”

It seemed to Nan that this young man was going to stand there talking to her for ever ; and she knew that his eyes, which were extremely keen and observant, were regarding her dishevelled hair. At the best of times, order and smoothness had never been the strong points of what a Brighton youth had on one occasion irreverently termed her wig. She remembered that boy and his insolent phrase at this very moment. “Hallo, ginger ! where did you buy your wig ?” he had called out. She wished she had taken a minute to consider before rushing downstairs.

“Will you come and see my sisters after breakfast ?” she said, with a wild effort to get away.

But no ; he continued to talk in a gentle, familiar, submissive way, as if he had known her a very long time, and yet did not like to presume on the intimacy. And he talked about a good many things (it was as yet not eight o'clock, and there was scarcely any one about), though he generally came round to suggesting that there were certain favoured people in the world whose fine-

ness of character was easily apparent. And he said that you ought not to lose the chance of securing the friendship of such rare mortals : it would be one of the joys of life. To be thought well of by people such as they, whose approval was worth something ; to be remembered in absence ; to know there were some people not fickle, trivial, or insincere. . . . In short, he talked about everything and nothing, apparently for the sole purpose of detaining her, and Nan knew that all the time he was looking at those wisps and rings of unbridled hair.

“ Good-bye for the present,” she said, holding out her hand.

He held her hand for a second—inadvertently, it seemed.

“ I shall come round about half-past nine to see your sisters. It was excessively kind of you to come down ; I might have missed you again as I missed you at Lucerne.”

“ Oh, well,” she said, in the most matter-of-fact way, “ I thought it might be more than an accident. Good-bye ! ”

Nan found that her sisters had got up and were nearly ready to come downstairs, so that she must have been kept talking there for a considerable time. At breakfast she remarked casually that Lieutenant King was in Chur, and that he

was also thinking of setting out for Splügen that morning. Edith the Beauty opened her brown eyes very wide ; Mary, the elder sister, began to ask a few questions. Presently the latter laughed in her cold way.

“It is rather audacious,” she said. “What are we to do with him?”

“We have nothing whatever to do with him,” said Nan, somewhat hotly.

“It will be very nice,” said Edith, “if there is a *table d’hôte* in the evening. And if we were to get into trouble with the driver, it would be useful to have a man near to use bad language.”

“Well, we shan’t see much of him on the way,” remarked Miss Beresford. “We have four horses ; of course he will only have two.”

“I don’t know,” said Edith. “You may be sure he doesn’t live on his lieutenant’s pay. Mamma says the Kings of Kingscourt are very rich.”

“They say the elder brother has gone fearfully to the bad,” said Miss Beresford, in a lower voice. “The old people are very proud of this one, and the way he has got on in his profession.”

“Well,” said Edith, “he is’very good-looking, at all events. I hope he will come and make up a little party at the *table d’hôte* ; it will be an

amusement. Very good-looking I call him. It must be his eyes. They are very extraordinary, to be so clear and yet so dark in the blue ; I never saw eyes like that before."

Nan, sitting silent and indignant, considered that it was more than ridiculous—it was unfeminine, it was altogether abominable—for a girl to talk like that about a man's eyes. If she had spoken about the shape of his forehead, and admired that, then that would have been sensible enough ; but to talk about his eyes as if he were a doll—as if he were a wax figure in a hair-dresser's window—as if he were one of the idiotic beauty-youths of the King's Road—that stirred her to revolt altogether. But Edith always was a baby.

At half-past nine Frank King called, and was very kindly and gravely received by the two elder girls. But he made no pretence of being there by accident. He said he had remembered Miss Beresford's telling him that they were to cross the Splügen into Italy ; and as he was quite alone, he thought he would choose the same route on the chance of running across them somewhere. And they would see something of each other on the road. It was true he had only two horses, and doubtless they had four ; but the return carriage he had hired was a light little

thing, and he had scarcely any luggage ; and no doubt he would meet them again at lunch. Did they propose to lunch at Thusis ? It was at Thusis they proposed to lunch. He should most likely seem them at Thusis ; meantime he would only say *au revoir*.

So, in due course, the great old-fashioned chariot was brought round, the four horses shaking their heads and jangling their bells ; and the luggage of the girls, which was considerable, was corded on behind ; and the maid got on the box, and then the girls themselves appeared and took their places, and the landlord bowed and took off his hat, and the driver cracked an enormous whip, and away they went from Chur along the level river valley, by the perpetual maize-fields, under the gray scarred mountains. It was a changeable, doubtful-looking day, with gleams of sunlight and sudden darkenings over of rain-cloud ; but the rapid motion of the comfortable old carriage kept them merry enough. Farther and farther into the mysterious mountain-land they went ; rattling through small towns with violently coloured frescoes on the walls ; swinging along the valley road, with always the turbid rushing river below ; passing innumerable ruined towers perched on precipitous crags ; and generally wondering when the

serious business of climbing the Alps was to begin. The mountains had grown grander now, and there were snow-slopes gleaming afar in the wan sunlight. It was not a settled sort of sunlight at all. Just as they entered Thusis they were caught by a smart shower, and were glad to take refuge in the inn.

Now, Miss Beresford had only finished ordering luncheon—which she did in excellent German, of a clear, hard, Hanoverian kind—when in walked Frank King, very pleased to rejoin them, apparently quite delighted with the rain, and plainly anxious to be allowed to join their table. That was what it came to. Moreover, as luncheon proceeded, the mountains outside darkened.

“We are in for a bad afternoon,” said he; and then he added, in an off-hand way, “Does your maid speak German, Miss Beresford?”

“Parsons speaks nothing but English,” said Miss Beresford.

“And that indifferently,” added Nan.

“Oh! Because, you see, it will be uncommonly hard for her to be sitting there till evening, not speaking a word, and facing pelting rain all the time.”

“She can come in beside us,” said Nan promptly.

“I was going to suggest,” said he in the same off-hand fashion, “that—I only mean if it rains—if it rains, I was going to suggest, don’t you see, that she could have my trap, if she chose, and then—then if you wouldn’t mind giving me a seat in your carriage, which has plenty of room, I should think——”

“It is rather a roundabout way out of the difficulty,” said Miss Beresford, laughing; “but we shall be very pleased if you will come into our carriage, if it rains.”

And it did. It was through streaming window-panes that they beheld the gloomy gorge of the Via Mala, with the pine-clad mountains rising sheer over-head, and far below the thundering of the Rhine along the narrow and twisting chasm. It was but vaguely that they knew of the wonderful tunnels through the rocks, and the overhanging precipices, and the rich-coloured, dripping autumn foliage, and the hideous declivities that went down to the roaring and swollen torrent. But it has been remarked before now that in the case of driving parties people’s spirits always get highest in bad weather. Whether they get into a sort of despairing madness, or whether it is out of a reckless defiance, the fact remains that the finest enjoyment of a driving trip is experienced in pouring rain. And that

party of four, within the shut-up old chariot, seemed merry enough. Their talking and laughing quite drowned the roaring of the river. Nan was a trifle silent, perhaps; but then Frank King did talking for two, and he had innumerable adventures and stories to tell relating to every corner of the earth. He had no longer any official gravity to observe. His laughter was so genuine as to be infectious; even Nan felt herself smiling, though she thought that the commander of a man-of-war ought not to go on like this. And how could Frank King, who had been practically all his life at sea, know so much about the rustics in Wiltshire? How could he have gone through those poaching adventures, for example? She knew that Kingscourt was in Wiltshire; but if, as he had told her, he was in the navy when the English fleet paid its famous visit to Cherbourg, he must have left Wiltshire when he was a very small boy indeed.

They got higher and higher into the mountains as the evening fell, and the mists closed down upon them. Outside they heard nothing but the rattle of the rain on the top of the carriage, and the tinkle of the horses' bells. By and by the lamps were lit. Later they were in absolute blackness—plunging through the streaming night; but they were contented enough.

When the carriage stopped they were quite surprised. Splügen already ! And where was the inn ? Frank King sprang out, and found himself in a sort of big square, with the rain pelting down, and the building opposite him apparently closed. But presently a man appeared with a lantern, who informed him that they could have beds certainly, but in the *dépendance*, as the hotel was overcrowded. Then the gentleman with the lantern disappeared.

It was fortunate, indeed, for these young ladies that they had a male protector and champion with them ; for the bad weather had detained many people, the hotel was crammed full, and as this was the *table d'hôte* hour, the landlord and all his staff, with every disposition in the world to be obliging, were at their wits' end. Every one was wanted in the dining-chamber : how could any one look after the new arrivals, or show them their rooms on the other side of the square, or attend to their luggage ? Now it was that this young sailor began to show a touch of authority. First of all he got the young ladies to descend, and bundled them into the little reading-room ; that was clearing the decks for action. The last they saw of him was that he had seized a man by the collar, and was

quietly, but firmly, taking him to the door, addressing him the while in an extraordinary mixture of French and German concerning luggage, and rooms, and the necessity of a lantern to show people across the square. In about a quarter of an hour he returned, dripping wet.

“Well, that’s all settled,” he said, cheerfully, as he dried his face with his handkerchief. “I’ve seen the rooms—very big, and bare, and cold, but the best they have. And I’ve left Miss Parsons in the kitchen, tearing her hair over some things that have got wet. And I’ve got four places at the *table d’hôte*, which is going on. Now, if you wish to go and see your rooms and dress for dinner, there is a little girl waiting with a lantern; or if you prefer going in to *table d’hôte* at once——”

“Oh, certainly,” said Miss Beresford. “Let us take it when we can get it. They won’t mind us going in as we are. We all look respectable enough, if it wasn’t for Nan’s hair: she must have been asleep.”

“At all events, you will find it warm in here,” said he, leading the way, “and that’s something. The bedrooms will make you shiver; they look like a jail. You must remember you are up some height now.”

So crowded and busy was the modest little Speisesaal that they entered quite unnoticed, and found themselves relegated to a small side-table at the upper end of the room. It was a most comfortable and excellent arrangement, and the pleasant good-humour that had prevailed throughout the afternoon did not desert them now. Even Nan began to make little jokes—in her quiet way; and as for Lieutenant Frank King he was so particularly civil to everybody that the landlord himself went away to get the wine he had ordered.

“One thing is certain,” said Frank King. “We are in a capital position for raking that dinner-table from end to end with criticism. Look at the big man in the middle. Did you ever see anybody so pompous, and stilted, and portentous? He never speaks. I believe he must be first cousin to the Sphinx.”

“He is only the centre of gravity; every dinner-table should have that, you know,” said Nan, shyly.

He gave her a quick look and said,

“Do you know, Miss Anne, you have made a great discovery? You have discovered the *raison d'être* of stupid people.”

“Have I?” said Nan, with a laugh. “Then I must be first cousin to M. Jourdain.”

“They are the ballast of the social ship, don’t you see?” he said eagerly. “You can’t sail a ship without ballast; and without the weight of the stupid people the feather-headed people—the topsail-headed people—would tear everything out of her and send her flying. And so you want a good substantial centre of gravity at a dinner-table, as you say; a solid root for lighter things to branch from; a buffer coming between the electric sparks——”

“I am afraid we are getting a little bit mixed,” said Mary Beresford, with her cold smile.

“I wish, Lieutenant King,” said Edith, who was just a trifle annoyed, “that you would begin and talk to Nan about logarithms and co-sines and triangles and things like that. She crushes us, because we don’t know. Now we should like to see her found out.”

“I am too wise to try anything of the kind,” said Frank King, laughing. “It might be the other way round; it is more likely that Miss Nan would find me out.”

So they chatted, and the evening passed cheerfully and pleasantly; and they retired to rest early, for they had to start betimes in the morning. Already Lieutenant Frank King seemed quite to belong to the party; it was the most

natural thing in the world that he should sit at the same table and order things for them. And no one noticed—he did not notice it himself—that he had advanced from “Miss Anne” to “Miss Nan.” Perhaps he would soon drop the “Miss” altogether.

CHAPTER VIII.

SNOW AND MIST AND SUNLIGHT.

THE desolation of that next morning! A wonder of snow outside the windows—the large dark flakes slowly, noiselessly passing the panes; snow on the open space fronting the great, gaunt hostelry; snow on the small spire of the church; and snow on the far reaches of the hills, retreating up there into the gray mists, where every pine-tree was a sharp black thing on the broad expanse of white. The girls were greatly downcast. They had their breakfast brought to them in the big cold room; they took it hurriedly, with scarcely a word. They saw Parsons rushing across the square; when she came in there were flakes of snow in her hair, and her fingers were blue with cold.

“The English ‘go abroad for pleasure,’” said Edith, with sarcasm.

By and by they heard the jingle of the bells outside, and on going below they found Frank King in the doorway, encased from head to foot in an ulster.

“This is indeed luck—this is great luck,” said he, blithely.

“Luck do you call it?” said Edith Beresford.

“Certainly,” said he; “the first snow of the year! Most opportune. Of course you must see the Splügen Pass in snow.”

“We shan’t see anything,” said Edith in gloom.

“Never mind,” said Miss Beresford, good-naturedly; “we shall have crossed the Alps in a snowstorm, and that sounds well. And I dare say we shall amuse ourselves somehow. Do you feel inclined to give up your carriage to-day again?”

She had turned to Frank King. There was a smile on her face, for she guessed that it was no great sacrifice on his part. Moreover, she had enjoyed that drive the day before; the presence of a fourth person broke the monotony of the talking of three girls together. It is needless to add that Frank King eagerly welcomed her proposal, and in due course the two carriages drove away from the big, bare hostelry to enter the unknown mountain-world.

A strange world they found it, when once they had left the level of the little valley and begun to climb the steep and twisting road cut on the face of the mountain. The aspect of things changed every few minutes, as the rolling

mists slowly blotted out this or that portion of the landscape, or settled down so close that they could see nothing but the wet snow in the road and the black-stemmed pines beyond, with their green branches stretching out towards them through the pall of cloud. Then sometimes they would look down into extraordinary gulfs of mist—extraordinary because, far below them, they would find the top of a fir-tree, the branches laden with snow, the tree itself apparently resting on nothing—floating in mid air. It was a phantasmal world altogether, the most cheerful feature of it being that at last the snow had ceased to fall.

This decided Nan to get out for a walk.

“You will be wet through,” her elder sister exclaimed.

“My boots are thick,” said Nan, “and Parsons has my waterproof.”

When she had got down, and disappeared, Miss Beresford said,

“She is a strange girl; she always wants to be alone.”

“She seems to think a great deal, and she always thinks in her own way,” said Frank King. “No doubt she prefers to be alone; but—but don’t you think I ought to get out and see that she is all right?”

"There are no brigands in these mountains, are there?" said Miss Beresford, laughing.

"And she can't lose her way," said the more serious Edith, "unless she were to fall over the side."

"I think I will get out," he said, and he called to the driver.

He found that Nan was already some way ahead, or rather overhead; but he soon overtook her. She was startled when she saw him, for the snow had deadened the sound of his approach.

"I believe it will clear soon," he said at a venture.

"It is altogether very strange," Nan said in something of a lower voice. "The fir-trees laden with snow like that, the cold, the gloom: it looks like some bygone Christmas come back suddenly. It is strange to find yourself in another part of the year: yesterday, summer; to-day, winter. I should not be surprised to meet a cart filled with holly, or to hear the bells ringing for morning service."

"You know there are people who never see winter," said he; "I wonder what it feels like when you move from place to place so as to live in a perpetual spring and summer."

"I don't think it can be the real spring," she

said, after a second. "The summer, I suppose, is the same anywhere ; it hasn't the newness and the strangeness of the spring. Wouldn't it be a nice thing now to be able to take some poor English lady who has been compelled to live all the early months of each year in the south, among hot-house sort of things, and just to show her for a minute a little English village in the real spring-time, such as she must have known when she was a girl, with the daffodils in the cottage gardens, and the young leaves on the elm and the hawthorn. And perhaps a lark would be singing high up ; and there might be a scent of wallflower ; and the children coming home with daisy wreaths. She would cry, perhaps ; but she would like it better than the hot-house flowers and the Riviera. There are some things that have a wonderful way of bringing back old memories—the first smell of wallflower in the spring is one, and the first fall of snow in the winter. And there's an old-fashioned kind of musky smell, too, that always means Sunday clothes, and a tall pew, and a village choir."

"But you seem to have a strong faculty of association," said young Frank King, who was far more interested in Nan than in musk.

"I don't know," she said, carelessly. "I don't study myself much. But I know I have a strong

bump of locality—isn't that what they call it? I wish I had been born in a splendid place. I wish I had been born among great mountains, or amongst remote sea islands, or even beautiful lake scenery; and I know I should have loved my native place passionately and yearned for it; and I should have thought it was the most beautiful place in the world—especially when I was away from it—for that's the usual way. But when you are born in London and live in Brighton, you can't make much out of that."

Then she added, with some compunction,

"Not but that I am very fond of the south coast. I know it so well; and of course you get fond of anything that you are very intimate with, especially if other people don't know much about it. And there is far more solitariness about the south coast than the people imagine who come down to the Bedford Hotel for a week."

"You are a great walker, are you not?" he said.

"Oh, no; but I walk a good deal."

"And always alone?"

"Generally. It is very seldom I have a companion. Do you know Singing Sal?"

"Singing Sal? No. How should I? Who is she?"

“A kind of tramping musician,” said Nan, with a grave smile. “She is a friend of the fishermen and coastguardsmen and sailors down there; I dare say some of your men must have heard of her. She is a good-looking woman, and very pleasant in her manner, and quite intelligent. I have seen her very often, but I never made her acquaintance till the week before last.”

“Her acquaintance!”

“Yes,” said Nan, simply; “and I mean to renew it when I get back, if mamma will let me. Singing Sal knows far more about the coast than I do, and I want to learn more. . . . Oh, look!”

Both of them had been for some time aware of a vague luminousness surrounding them, as if the sun wanted to get through the masses of vapour; but at this moment she, happening to turn her head, found that the wind had in one direction swept away the mist, and behold, far away in the valley beneath them, they could see the village of Splügen, shining quite yellow in the sunlight. Then the clouds slowly closed over the golden little picture, and they turned and walked on. But in front of them, overhead, the wind was still at work, and there were threads of keen blue now appearing over the twisting

vapours. Things began to be more cheerful. Both the carriages behind had been thrown open. Nan's face looked pink, after one's eyes had got so used to the whiteness of the snow.

"I suppose there are no people so warmly attached to their country as the Swiss are," she said (she was not ordinarily a chatter-box, but the cold, keen air seemed to have vivified her). "I am very glad the big thieves of the world left Switzerland alone. It would have been a shame to steal this little bit from so brave a people. Do you know the song of the Swiss soldier in the trenches at Strasburg? I think it is one of the most pathetic songs in the world."

"No, I don't," he said. How delighted he was to let her ramble on in this way, revealing the clear, beautiful soul, as Singing Sal might have thought.

"He tells the story himself," she continued. "It is the sound of the Alphorn that has brought this sorrow to him, he says. He was in the trenches at night, and he heard the sound of the Alphorn far away, and nothing would do but that he must try to escape and reach his fatherland by swimming the river. Then he is taken, and brought before the officers, and condemned to be shot; and he only asks his brother soldiers

to fire straight—— But I am not going to spoil it.”

She put her hand up furtively for a second to her eyes, and then she said cheerfully—

“I have had enough walking. Suppose we wait for the carriage?”

“I think I ought to apologise to you, Miss Anne,” said he. “You prefer walking by yourself—I ought not to have come and bothered you.”

“It is of no consequence,” said Nan, looking back for the carriage, “so long as you haven’t wet your feet.”

They got into the carriage and continued on their way; and very soon it became apparent, from the flashes of sunlight and gleams of blue, that they had worked their way up through the cloud-layers. In process of time, indeed, they got clear of the mists altogether, and emerged on to the higher valleys of the Alps—vast, sterile, the white snow-plains glittering in the sun, except where the rocks showed through in points of intense black. There were no longer any pines. They were in a world of snow and barren rocks and brilliant sunlight, with a cold luminous blue sky overhead; themselves the only living creatures visible; their voices sounding strangely distinct in the silence.

When they were quite at the summit of the pass, a smurr, as we say in Scotland, came over ; but it did not last. By the time they had got the drags on the wheels, the vast gorge before them—descending and winding until it disappeared in a wall of mountains of the deepest blue—was again filled with sunlight ; and now they began to be a little bit sheltered from the wind as the horses trotted and splashed through the wet snow, carrying them away down into Italy.

They lunched at Campo Dolcino, still some thousands of feet above the level of the sea. Then on again, swinging away at a rapid pace down into a mighty valley ; rattling through galleries cut in the solid rock ; then out again into the grateful sunlight ; taking the sharp curves of the road at the same breakneck speed ; with always below them—and so far below them that it was silent—a rushing river sweeping down between fair pastures and dots of villages. As the evening fell, this clatter of hoofs and wheels came to a sudden end ; for they were entering the town of Chiavenna, and there you must go at walking pace through the narrow little thoroughfares. It was strange for them to come down from the snow-world into this ordinary little town, and to find in the hotel not only all

sorts of products of a high civilisation, but even people who were speaking the familiar English tongue.

There was a telegram addressed "Lieutenant F. H. King, R.N.," in the case in the bureau; when Frank King had got it out and read it he was silent for a second or two.

"I hope there is no bad news," said Miss Beresford, in a kindly way. She was not a very sympathetic person; but Frank King had brightened up their tour during these last two days, and she was in a measure grateful to him.

"No," he said, absently. "Oh, no, not bad news. The telegram is from the officer I left in charge of the *Fly-by-Night*; I rather think that I shall be setting out for home again in a couple of days."

"Oh, I am sorry for that," she said, quite naturally.

"You go on again to-morrow, Miss Beresford?"

"We were proposing to do so."

"And where do you think of going to when you get to Lake Como?"

"Bellagio, most probably."

"Oh, well, I will go with you as far as Bellagio, if I may," he said, somewhat thoughtfully.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SERENATA.

NEXT morning also he was preoccupied and anxious, insomuch that even Nan noticed it and good-naturedly hoped he had had no bad news. He started somewhat.

"No, oh no," he said. "Only the telegram I got last night makes it necessary for me to start for home to-morrow."

"Then, at least," said Nan cheerfully, "you will see Lake Como before you go."

Her eldest sister smiled in her superior way.

"Nan's head is full of romance," she said. "She expects to see the Como of the print-shops: don't you, Nan? Blue water and golden boats, and pink hills, and Claude Melnotte's castle lifting its—whatever was it?—to eternal summer. I am afraid the quotation is not quite correct."

And the truth was that, despite this warning, Nan did seem somewhat disappointed, when after hours of rattling and splashing along a muddy road, they came upon a stretch of dirty,

chalky-green water that in a manner mirrored the gray and barren crags above it.

"That isn't Como!" cried Nan. "It can't be."

"Oh, but it is," Miss Beresford said, laughing. "At least it's the upper end of it."

But Nan would not believe it; and when at last they reached Colico, and fought their way through the crowd of swarthy good-for-nothings who strove to attach themselves to every scrap of luggage, and when they had got on board the steamer and secured commanding positions on the upper deck, then Nan declared that they were about to see the real Lake of Como. It was observed that the young sailor glanced once or twice rather anxiously at the sky and the seething clouds.

Well, they sailed away down through this stretch of pallid green water, that was here and there ruffled with wind, and here and there smooth enough to reflect the silver-gray sky; and they called at successive little villages; and they began to be anxious about a certain banking up of purple clouds in the south-west. They forgot about the eternal summer, and got out their waterproofs. They were glad to find themselves drawing near to Bellagio, and its big hotels, and villas, and terraced gardens. The wind had risen; the driven green water was here

and there hissing white; and just as they were landing, a pink flash of lightning darted across that dense wall of purple cloud, and there was a long and reverberating rattle of thunder.

"It seems to me we have just got in in time," said Frank King in the hall of the hotel.

The storm increased in fury. The girls could scarcely dress for dinner through being attracted to the window by the witches' cantrips outside. The thunder blackness in the south-west had deepened; the wind was whirling by great masses of vapour; the water was springing high along the terraces; and the trees in the terraced gardens were blown this way and that, even though their branches were heavy with rain. Then it was that Edith Beresford said—

"Nan, you ought to persuade Lieutenant King to stay over another day. He hasn't seen Como. This isn't Como."

"I?" said Nan sharply. "What have I to do with it? He can go or stay as he pleases."

"Besides," continued Edith, "in consequence of this *tempo cattivo*——"

"I suppose that means weather that rains cats and dogs," said Nan, whose anger was of the briefest duration.

"——the grand *Serenata* is put off till to-

morrow night. Now he ought to stay and see the illuminations of the boats."

"The illuminations," said Nan. "I should think he had something else to think of."

Nevertheless, when, at dinner, Miss Edith was good enough to put these considerations before Lieutenant King, he seemed very anxious to assent, and he at once called for a time-table; and eventually made out that by taking the night train somewhere or other, he could remain at Bellagio over the next day. And he was rewarded, so far as the weather went. The morning was quite Como-like—fair and blue and calm; the sun shining on the far wooded hills, and on the sparkling little villages at their foot; the green lake still running high; with here and there a white tip breaking; a blaze of sunlight on the gardens below—on the green acacia-branches and the masses of scarlet salvia—and on the white hot terraces where the lizards lay basking.

It was a long, idle, delicious day; and somehow he contrived to be near Nan most of the time. He was always anxious to know what she thought about this or about that; he directed her attention to various things; he sometimes talked to her about his ship—and about what sailors thought of when they were far from home and

friends. They went out on the lake—these four ; the hot sun had stilled the water somewhat ; reclining in the cushioned stern of the boat, in the shelter of the awning, they could hear the bells on shore faint and distant. Or they walked in that long allée leading from one end of the gardens—the double line of short chestnuts offering cool and pleasant shadow ; the water lapping along the stone parapet beside them ; and between each two of the stems a framed picture, as it were, of the lake and the velvet-soft slopes beyond. It was all very pretty, they said. It was a trifle commonplace, perhaps ; there were a good many hotels and little excursion steamers about ; and perhaps here and there a suggestion of the toy-shop. But it was pretty. Indeed, towards sunset, it was very nearly becoming something more. Then the colours in the skies deepened ; in the shadows below the villages were lost altogether ; and the mountains, growing more and more sombre under the rich gold above, began to be almost fine. One half forgot the Cockneyism and familiarity of the place, and for a moment had a glimpse of the true loneliness and solemnity of the hills.

As the dusk fell they began to bethink themselves of what was before them.

"It would have been a bad thing for the musicians from La Scala if they had attempted to go out last evening," Miss Beresford remarked.

"It will be a bad thing for us," said Edith, who was the musical one, "if we attempt to go on board their steamer this evening. It will be far too loud. You should never be too near. And, especially where there is water, music sounds so well at some distance."

"You can hire a small boat, then," said Nan. "They are all putting up their Chinese lanterns."

"Oh, I wouldn't advise that," said Frank King, quickly. "I don't think it would be safe."

"A sailor afraid of boats!" said Miss Edith with a laugh.

"Oh, as for that," said Nan, warmly, "every one knows that it's those who are most ignorant of boats who are most reckless in them. It's very easy to be brave if you're stupidly ignorant. I know papa used to say it was always the most experienced sportsman who took most care about unloading his gun on going into a house. Why, if you're walking along the pier, and see some young fools standing up in a boat and rocking it until the gunwale touches the water, you may be sure they're haberdashers down from the borough for a day, who have never been in a boat before."

In the dusk they could not see that Frank King's face flushed with pleasure at this warm defence; but he only said quietly,

"You see there will be ten or twelve steamers churning about in the dark; and if some careless boatman were to make a mistake—or lose his head—you might be under the paddles in a second. I think you should either get on board or stay ashore; and I should say you were as well off here as anywhere. You will see the procession on the lake very well; and even if they should halt over there at Cadenabbia for the music, we could hear it here excellently."

"It is very good advice, Edith," said Miss Beresford, seriously. "I don't at all like small boats. And there goes the first dinner-bell; so let's make haste."

At dinner Frank King did not say much; he seemed to be thinking of his departure on the morrow. Once, however, when they happened to be talking about Brighton, he looked across the table to Nan, and said,

"Oh, by-the-way, what was the name of the woman you told me about—whom you met on the downs?"

"Singing Sal," answered Nan, with composure.

"I shall ask about her when I get to Portsmouth," he said.

"She is seldom in the big towns ; she prefers tramping by herself along the country roads."

"Is this another of Nan's *protégées*?" asked Miss Beresford. "She knows the most extraordinary people. She is like the children when they are sent down to the beach when the tide is low ; they are always most delighted with the monstrous and hideous things they can pick up."

"You must have seen Singing Sal," said Nan, quietly. "And she is neither monstrous nor hideous. She is very well dressed, and she sings with a great deal of feeling."

"Perhaps she will come and have afternoon tea with us?" said Edith, with a sarcastic air.

"I don't think she would find it interesting enough," Nan answered, calmly.

When, after dinner, they went out on to the balcony above the garden, they found that the wonders of the night had already begun. Far on the other side of the lake the houses of Cadenabbia were all ablaze with millions of small gold points, the yellow glow from which glimmered down on the black water. Then in the garden here, there were rows upon rows of Chinese lanterns, of all colours, just moving in the almost imperceptible breeze ; while along the shore, the villas had their frontage-walls deco-

rated with brilliant lines of illuminated cups, each a crimson, or white, or emerald star. Moreover, at the steps of the terrace below, there was a great bustle of boats; and each boat had its pink paper lantern glowing like a huge firefly in the darkness; and there was a confusion of chaffering and calling with brightly dressed figures descending by the light of torches, and disappearing into the unknown. Then these boats began to move away—with their glow-worm lanterns swaying in the black night. The hotel seemed almost deserted. There was silence along the shores.

By and by, at a great distance, they beheld a wonderful thing come slowly into view—far away in the open space of darkness that they knew to be the lake. It was at first only a glow of crimson; but as it came nearer, this glow separated into points, each point a ruby-coloured shaft of fire, and they saw that this must be a steamer illuminated by red lamps. And then another steamer, and another, came sailing up, with different colours gleaming; until one, far higher than the others—a great mass of glittering gold—appeared in the midst of them, and round this all the fleet of small boats, that were, of course, only distinguishable by their parti-coloured lanterns, seemed to gather.

"That is the steamer that has the musicians, clearly," said Frank King.

"Yes ; but I don't hear any music," answered Edith, in a voice that seemed rather ominous.

They sat and waited. The last of the guests had got into the small boats and gone away ; they were left alone in front of the big hotel. The moon was rising behind the hills in the south, and already the surface of the lake was beginning to declare itself—a dull blue-black.

"I cannot hear the least sound ; is it possible they can be playing ? " said Edith, disappointedly.

It was a beautiful spectacle, at all events, even if there were no sound accompanying it. For now the moon had risen clear, and there was a pale soft light all along the northern hills, and just enough radiance lying over the bosom of the lake to show the darkness of the hulls of the distant steamers. And then, as they watched, some order seemed to grow out of that confusion of coloured lights ; the high golden mass drew away ; and then the others followed, until the long undulating line seemed like some splendid meteor in the night. There was no sound. Cadenabbia, with all its yellow fire, was as clearly deserted as this Bellagio here, with all its paper lanterns and coloured cups. The procession had slowly departed. The *Serenata* was

taking place somewhere else. The gardens of this hotel were silent but for the occasional voices of Frank King and his companions.

Well, they laughed away their disappointment ; and chatted pleasantly, and enjoyed the beautiful night, until Miss Beresford thought it was time for them to go indoors.

"But where's Nan?" she said. "That girl is never to be found."

"I think I can find her," said Frank King, rising hastily. He had been regarding for some time back that long allée between the chestnuts, and a dark figure there that was slowly pacing up and down, occasionally crossing the patches of moonlight. When he had got about half-way along, he found Nan leaning with her elbows on the parapet, and looking out on the moonlit lake.

"Oh, Miss Anne," he said, "your sister wants you to come indoors."

"All right," she said cheerfully, raising herself and preparing to go.

"But I want to say a word to you," he said hurriedly. "I have been trying for an opportunity these two days. I hope you won't think it strange or premature or impertinent——"

"Oh no," said Nan, with a sudden fear of she knew not what ; "but let us go indoors."

"No, here, now," he pleaded. "Only one moment. I know we are young; perhaps I should not ask you to pledge yourself, but all I ask for is to be allowed to hope. Surely you understand. Nan, will you be my wife—some day?"

He would have taken her hand; but she withdrew it quickly, and said with a sort of gasp,

"Oh, I am so sorry. I had no idea. It must be my fault, I am sure; but I did not know—I was not thinking of such a thing for a moment——"

"But you will give me leave to hope?" he said. "I mean some day—not now."

"Oh no, no!" she said with an earnestness that was almost piteous. "If I have made a mistake before, this must be clear now. Oh, don't think of such a thing. It never could be—never, never. I am very sorry if I have pained you; but—but you don't know anything about me; and you will soon forget, for we are both far too young—at least I am—to think of such things; and—and I am very, very sorry."

"But do you mean that I am never to think of it again, even as a hope?" he said, slowly.

"Oh, I do mean that—I do! If there has been a mistake, let it be clear now. Can I not be your friend?"

She held out her hand. After a second or so of hesitation, he took it.

"I know more of you than you suspect," he said slowly, and with a touch of hopelessness in his voice. "I could see what you were the first half-hour I had spoken to you. And I know you know your own mind, and that you are sincere. Well, I had hoped for something else; but even your friendship will be valuable to me—when I have had a little time to forget."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" said Nan, somewhat incoherently. "I know you will be wise. You have your profession to think of; that is of far more importance. I know you will be wise, and generous too, and forgive me if the fault has been mine. Now, we will not speak of any such thing again; let it be as if it had never been. Come."

He pressed her hand in silence—it was a token of good-bye. These two did not see each other again for more than three years.

CHAPTER X.

JINNY.

ONE night towards the end of that interval a strange scene occurred in the old manor-house of Kingscourt, Wiltshire. From an early part of the evening it was apparent that something unusual was about to take place. The sleepy old mansion was all astir, a big fire blazed in the fireplace of the hall, and even the long corridor, which was in effect a picture-gallery, and ordinarily looked rather grim with its oak paneling and dusky portraits and trophies of arms, had been so brilliantly lit up that it seemed almost cheerful.

There was no cheerfulness, however, on the face of the lord of the manor himself; and there was nothing but a keen and anxious sympathy in the regard of his friend the Vicar, who had come to keep him company. The former, Stephen Holford King, was a hale old man of over seventy, with a smoothly-shaven face grown red with exposure to the weather, silvery short-

cropped hair, and fine, impressive features. His old college friend, the Rev. Mr. Lynnton, was a smaller man, and somewhat younger, though his pale face had a sad expression, as though he had come through much trouble. He also was clean shaven, which added character to his clear-cut features. His chest was narrow, and he stooped a little.

“It is kind of you to come early, Vicar,” said the taller man, who seemed much agitated in spite of his outwardly firm demeanour. “It will be a terrible ordeal for my poor wife. I wish the evening were over.”

“You must face it like a man, friend King,” said the other. “You have acted rightly, great as the pain must be to yourself. It is the young man’s last chance, and surely he accepts it or he would not be coming at all. And—she—also.”

“If only he hadn’t married her—if only he hadn’t married her. She might have ruined him in pocket, as she has ruined others before; but, to come in here——”

He glanced at the portraits along the walls; he seemed scarcely to know what he was saying.

“You might preach a sermon from what I am suffering now, Vicar. Oh, I deserve it. My pride has been taken down at last. But the punishment is hard——”

"Pardon me, friend King; but you exaggerate surely. Surely a certain measure of family pride is justifiable; it ought to nerve a man to be worthy of those who have gone before him. Nor have I ever thought that your feeling about your name being a heritage that you had to guard jealously and piously was otherwise than just——"

"Five centuries, Vicar—for five centuries the Kings of Kingscourt, whether knights or commoners, have been gentlemen—gentlemen every man of them; and this is the end!"

"But even now, old friend, you must not look at the blackest side of things. Alfred may requite you yet by his conduct for the tremendous sacrifice you and Mrs. King are making. He has committed a social crime; but surely that is better than living in sin——"

"Vicar, I know you have tried to look only at the cheerful side of things, as far as your cloth will permit, and I trust in God that something may yet come of it; but if not—if this last appeal to him produces nothing more than the others—then there is a final alternative that may help me to save Kingscourt and the family name."

"What is that?" his friend said, eagerly.

"I will not speak of it now; we must hope for the best."

At this moment there was heard the rumbling of carriage-wheels outside, and the old man started.

"Come, let us go into the hall," he said quickly; and then he added, in a lower and agitated voice, "Vicar, do you think my poor wife will—will have to kiss this woman? That is what she dreads. That is what terrifies her."

The pale-faced clergyman seemed embarrassed, and said hastily,

"There will be some confusion, no doubt. Come, friend King, pull yourself together. You are welcoming home your son and his newly-married wife, remember."

The great bell rang, the servants swarmed into the hall, the door was opened, and outside, in the darkness, the carriage lamps were visible, shining down on the broad steps. At the same moment a lady came along from the corridor: a tall, elderly woman, with a pale, sweet face, quite white hair done up in old-fashioned little curls, and with eyes of a sad, benign expression. She seemed to be very pleased and cheerful; it was only the Vicar, who shook hands with her, who knew that her whole frame was trembling.

"So you have come to welcome home the bride, Mr. Lynnton," she said, in a clear voice, so that every one could hear. "Alfred will be

pleased to see you again, after his long absence. They say that being so much abroad has greatly improved him."

"It could not well improve his appearance, Mrs. King; he was always a handsome lad," said the Vicar—his eyes still turned towards the door.

This was, indeed, a strikingly handsome man who now came up the steps—taller and more massive than his brother Frank, lighter also in hair and eyes. At this first glance one scarcely noticed that his face was somewhat flushed, and that the light blue eyes had a sort of uncertain nervous throb in them.

"My wife, mother."

The Vicar stared with astonishment. This pretty, bright-faced little thing did not look more than eighteen or nineteen, though in fact she was five-and-twenty; and in her tight-fitting ulster and plain gray hat, and quiet yellow-gray gloves, she looked the very embodiment of girlish grace, and neatness, and decorum.

The white-haired woman took this new visitor by both hands.

"I am glad you have come, my dear," said she, without any quaver of the voice, and she kissed her first on one cheek and then on the other. "But you must be tired with your long journey.

Come, I will show you your dressing-room ; they have taken some tea up for you."

"And to-night we dine at seven, my dear," said the father of the house, addressing her at the same time, "for we thought you might be hungry after your journey. So don't take too much time in dressing, my dear ; we are plain folks ; we will see all your finery another night. Higgins, have Mrs. Alfred's boxes taken up at once."

Mrs. Alfred meanwhile stood looking a little puzzled, a little amused, but not at all shy. She seemed to consider it rather a good joke.

"Go on, Jinny," her husband said to her lazily ; "I shan't dress."

"That is an old privilege of Alfred's, my dear," said Mrs. King, leading the new-comer away. "His father, now, hasn't missed dressing for dinner one evening since we were married, except the night the vicarage took fire. But I suppose young men are not so ceremonious now. Here is your room, my dear : Catherine is bringing some hot water, and she will open your boxes for you."

And the old lady herself went and stirred up the fire, and drew the low easy chair nearer to the little table where the tea-things were, and continued talking in the kindest way to her

new guest until the maid arrived. Mrs. Alfred had said nothing at all, but she seemed contented and amused.

At seven o'clock every one had assembled in the drawing-room except Mrs. Alfred. The Vicar's wife had arrived: she was a stout, anxious-eyed little woman, who was obviously alarmed, and talked much to assure those around her that she was quite at ease. Mr. Alfred himself was lazy, good-natured, indifferent—he had drunk two or three glasses of sherry meanwhile to pass the time.

Punctually at seven Mrs. Alfred appeared. She looked more prim and nice and neat than ever in this black silk dress with old lace on the open square in front and on the cuffs of the tight sleeves.

"Mrs. Lynnton—my daughter Jinny," said the old white-haired lady, introducing the new-comer to the Vicar's wife.

Dinner was announced, and the big folding doors thrown open.

"My dear," said Mr. King to his wife, "I must take in Mrs. Alfred. It is a welcome home, you know. Alfred, you take in Mrs. Lynnton. Come along, child."

And he gave her his arm with great ceremony, and led her into the long, old-fashioned dining-

room which was a blaze of candles, and gave her the seat at his right hand, and immediately called for a fire-screen lest the fire should be too much.

“Or will you sit the other side, my dear?” said he.

“Oh no, sir,” she said, very prettily, out of compliment to his age. “Oh no, sir, I am best pleased to sit where you wish me to sit.”

For by this time the amused look had gone out of her face, and she seemed to have grown sensible of the great kindness these people were trying to show her.

Dinner went on, and the conversation rested mainly between Mr. Alfred, who was asking questions about the people in the neighbourhood, and the Vicar, who answered him. But when anything amusing was said, it was addressed to Mrs. Alfred, or else they looked to see whether she was pleased; and she received a great deal of attention from the old gentleman next her, and had many kind things said to her by his wife. But Mrs. Alfred's face grew more and more strange. She seemed depressed and troubled—timid at the same time and self-conscious; once or twice her lips were tremulous. And then all at once she rose, and quickly went to where Mrs. King sat, and threw herself on

her knees, and clasped the old lady's knees, and burst into a wild fit of sobbing and crying. The old lady turned very pale, and put her hand on the younger woman's head gently. The servants pretended to see nothing. Mr. Alfred flushed angrily, and said—

“Jinny, don't make a fool of yourself. Go back to your seat.”

Then the elder woman raised her, with a tenderness and compassion not altogether assumed, and led her back, saying—

“You are tired, my dear. I thought you looked tired, my dear. We will let you go soon to bed to-night.”

Then everybody talked at once, and the little incident seemed easily forgotten. Moreover, as the evening progressed, old Stephen King convinced himself that he had done what was best for the bygone Kings of Kingscourt and any Kings of Kingscourt there might be. He would pay off his son's debts once more. These two would be content to remain for years in the country, till bygones should be bygones elsewhere; and even in the country the neighbours might pretend to a convenient ignorance. The Vicar would help him.

The Vicar and his wife left about ten; Mr. and Mrs. Alfred retired early; the various

agitations that had shaken the old silver-haired dame gave place to a quiescence that was in a measure hopeful. Then sleep overtook the old manor-house, and the silence of the night.

About midnight there was a loud crash in the dining-room. Certain of the servants slept on the ground-floor for safety's sake; and the first one—indeed, the only one—to be thoroughly aroused by this sudden noise was the butler, a young man who had inherited the position from his father. He jumped up, hastily donned some clothes, and carried a light along to the room, wisely thinking that if it was only a picture that had fallen he need not alarm the whole household. At the same time he went cautiously, for he did not wish to be seized by the throat unawares.

He found the dining-room door open, and something, in the dark inside, lying prone on the floor. He pushed forward his candle, and to his horror found it was Mrs. Alfred, who was slowly raising herself by both hands.

"Oh, ma'am, what has happened?" he cried.

"Be quiet. Where's the brandy?" she said, angrily; and then she put her hand to the side of her forehead. "I've struck my head against something."

This young man was a miracle of discretion, but he was startled. She did not talk incoherently, and yet she could not rise.

"Is it Mr. Alfred, ma'am? Shall I take him some brandy? I hope he isn't ill, ma'am?" he said in a breath.

"Mr. Alfred, you fool! He's been dead drunk in bed for more than an hour. Where's the brandy? Why don't you leave the spirit-stand out, you miserly thief?"

Then he saw how matters stood; and though he was frightened a little, he was prudent. He went and got some brandy and water in a tumbler; he coaxed her to go upstairs; he assisted her up; and then, having put her quietly into her room, he returned downstairs, and locked the dining-room door, putting the key in his pocket.

This incident the young butler kept discreetly to himself; he was not going to imperil his situation by telling such a story about his future master and mistress. All the same, the old father and mother began to grow very uneasy. Mrs. Alfred was too unwell to appear next day, nor would she see any one. She wanted brandy, however, to keep her system up. The following day the same legend was repeated. On the evening of that day Alfred King sought out his

father in the study, and said he wanted to speak to him.

“Look here, father, it’s no use. I’ll tell the truth. I came down here to humbug you, and get some more money out of you. But what’s the good?—if Jinny had the wealth of the Rothschilds she’d run through it in a fortnight; and then her first trick would be to cut me. Oh, I know her; she’s not a bad sort; but she’s been brought up to be what she is, and she doesn’t mean anything shabby, anything more than a cat thinks itself cruel when it plays with a mouse. Well, no matter.”

He rang the bell, ordered some brandy and soda, and continued:

“Now, I’ve got some pride in the old place, too, father: I don’t want to see Jinny send Kingscourt spinning the moment you die. Well, this is what I propose. I’m no good. I’m played out. I’ve had my turn. Well, now, if you’ll clear off my debts this time, and start me free with £5000—giving it in trust to somebody—so that I can have my £200 or £250 a year—then I’ll consent to quash the entail; you bring home Frank, and give him Kingscourt. That’s better than being a sailor, and he’ll look after the old place.”

The old man regarded him calmly, but also with a strange, wistful, sad look.

"I had thought of it. But is there no other way, Alfred?"

"No. I'm broke. I'm done. If you want to save Kingscourt, that's the only way."

"And you?"

"I've had my turn; I can't complain. Sooner or later Jinny'll bolt. Then I'll go to the States and try my hand at something."

"Do you know they've just made Frank commander?"

"He'll be glad to leave the navy, all the same. Fellows can't marry while they're in the navy."

"What are your debts now, Alfred?"

Here the brandy and soda was brought in, which gave him time to think.

"I don't know exactly. Two brutes have got hold of me. I should fancy they could all be choked off with £8000—say £9000."

"£14,000—it will be a heavy charge on the estate."

"But I shall be off it. What's more, father, if Frank comes home, and gets married, and plays the good boy and all that kind of thing, don't let him get it into his head that I am jealous of him, or that he has supplanted me.

Frank is a fine chap. Tell him it was my proposal ; and I hope he'll be a better son to you than I have been. Well, is it a bargain, father ? ”

The old man thought for some time, and at length said,

“ Yes. ”

“ Well, then, there's another thing. Jinny's stumbled against something and got a black eye. Let's get her out of the house without the servants seeing her—this evening, after dusk. And I'll meet you any day you like at 'Shaen and Maskell's. ”

This, then, was how it came about that Commander Francis Holford King, R.N., was summoned home from the West Indies, where he had been with his ship, the *Hellespont*. He was grave for his years ; and he was more manly in figure, somehow, and certainly browner of face, than when we last saw him at Bellagio, on Lake Como ; but as he sailed past the Eddystone Light and entered the smooth waters of Plymouth Sound, there was something within him that told him his heart had not quite forgotten all its old memories.

CHAPTER XI.

TRANSFORMATION.

CAPTAIN FRANK was everything and did everything that his parents could have hoped for, except in one direction : he would have nothing said about marriage. He came home without a murmur ; he never uttered a word of regret about his giving up a profession that he had fair hopes of advancement in ; he adopted his new set of duties with cheerfulness, and entered with zest into the festivities of the season. For the leaf was beginning to fall, and all the people about were preparing to shoot the covers, so that parties had to be made up and invitations issued, and there soon came to be a general stir throughout the countryside. Captain Frank, though he was not much of a shot, took his share in all these things ; but he held aloof from womankind, and would not have his marriage even spoken of by his most intimate relatives.

What was the man made of that he could

resist a scene like this ? Imagine an open glade in a beautiful Wiltshire wood on the morning after a slight fall of snow. The skies are blue, and the world is full of clear sunlight ; the hollies are intensely green over the white of the snow ; here and there on the bare branches are a few red leaves. Also on the snow itself there is a stain of brownish red in some places, where the light air of the morning has shaken down withered needles from a tall pine-tree. Then there is a distant, sharp flutter ; the noise increases ; suddenly a beautiful thing—a meteor of bronze and crimson—comes whirring along at a tremendous pace ; Captain Frank blazes away with one barrel and misses ; before he knows where he is the pheasant seems a couple of miles off in the silver and blue of the sky, and he does not care to send the second barrel on a roving commission. He puts his gun over his shoulder, and returns to his pensive contemplation of the glittering green hollies, and the white snow, and the maze of bare branches going up into the blue.

But a new figure appears in the midst of this English-looking scene. A very pretty young lady comes along smiling—her pink cheeks looking all the pinker, and her blue eyes all the bluer, because of the white snow and also the white fur round her neck. This is pretty Mary

Coventry, who is staying at present at Kings-court. She has the brightest of smiles, and the whitest of teeth.

"Cousin Frank," she says, "where do you gentlemen lunch to-day?"

"Look here," he answers, "you've come right up the line between the guns and the beaters."

"Oh, that's all right," she says, gaily. "I know your father doesn't allow shooting at ground game into cover."

"Lunch is to be up at the Hill Farm."

"Oh, that's the very thing. I want a long walk. And I will help Higgins to have everything ready for you."

"It will be very rough and tumble. You had much better go back home to lunch."

"But I have come for the very purpose! I have brought sugar and cinnamon to mull the claret for you. You will find it scalding hot when you come."

A hare ran by some dozen yards off: he did not fire.

"I see I am in your way. Good-bye for the present."

"Good-bye. If you do mean to go up to the Hill Farm, you had better keep to the road. Or else," he added, laughing, "Mr. Ferrers will have something to say to you."

"Well," said pretty Mary Coventry to herself, as she passed on and into the road, "he did not even thank me for all my trouble. And I always thought sailors were supposed to be nice. But perhaps he is lamenting some blackamoor sweetheart in Patagonia, and won't take any notice of anybody."

It was about a week after this that Captain Frank, having run up to town, met a young gentleman in Piccadilly whom he seemed to recognise. He looked again—yes, it could be no other than Tom Beresford. But it was Tom Beresford transformed. Mr. Tom was now of age; he had his club, which he much frequented; he had assumed the air and manner of a man about town. That is to say, although he was clever enough and had a sufficient touch of humour, he cultivated a languid stare, and was chary of speech; and although he was a well-built young fellow, he walked with his elbows out and his knees in, as if the tightness of his trousers and his boots made it nigh impossible for him to walk at all. Moreover, his dress was more rigidly correct than ever; and of course he carried the inevitable cane—inevitable as the walking-stick of the Athenian.

Frank King went up to him eagerly.

"Hallo, Beresford, how are you?"

"How are you?" was the answer, as a slight boyish blush somewhat interfered with the dignity of Mr. Tom. "How are you? I heard you were at home again. I heard of you through the Strathernes."

"And I heard of you in the same way," said Captain King, who seemed greatly pleased to meet an old friend. "I'll turn and walk with you. I've nothing particular to do."

"Will you come and lunch with me?" said Mr. Tom (he had recovered himself after the inadvertent blush). "We can walk along to the club."

"Yes, I will," said Frank King, heartily. "Which is your club?"

"The Waterloo. They call it that because it isn't in Waterloo Place. It's in Regent Street."

"All right," said the other; but instantly he began to pursue his inquiries. "Yes, I heard of you and your family from the Strathernes. There have been great changes since I left England. Your eldest sister is married, is she not?"

"You mean Moll: yes. They live in town—a small house back there in Mayfair. He used to be a richer man," observed Mr. Tom, contemplatively, "before he took silk."

"But they are going to make him a judge, I hear."

"Faith, then, I hope he'll never have to try me," said Mr. Tom, with an air of conviction. "He and I never could hit it off. I hate pompous people, and people who give themselves airs. Now, I took a liking to you the first five minutes I saw you."

Captain King was dutifully grateful for this condescension. He said he also hated pompous people—he couldn't bear them. And then he asked about Tom's sister Edith.

"She's engaged to be married, isn't she?"

"It's my belief," said Mr. Tom, with a smile, "that she has engaged herself to both of them, just to make sure; and that she can't make up her mind which to send off. I don't wonder at her pulling a wry mouth about having to marry a soda-water manufacturer; but Soda-water isn't half a bad sort of fellow, and he is fearfully rich. You see he is particularly beaming just now, for there have been two or three blazing hot summers running, and the demand must have been tremendous. Then young Thynne, he's no end of a swell, no doubt; but you may be cousin to all kinds of earls and dukes without their giving you anything. I should fancy his father lets him have two or three hundred a year. I

should like to see the Sentimental get along with that! You can't live on a fellow's ancestry. I think she should take Soda-water, even if he hasn't got anything like a father to speak of. And even if he hasn't got a father—this was what Nan said—he might be equally '*sans père et sans reproche*.' ”

“It was your sister Anne said that, was it?” remarked Frank King, quickly.

“That was in her saucy days,” said Mr. Tom, sadly. “It's quite different now. Now she's on the pious lay.”

“The what?” said Frank King. It was clear that, however Mr. Tom had altered he had not chosen to improve his manner of speech.

“Oh, High Church and reredoses,” said the irreverent youth. “Silver embroideries, don't you know, and visiting the poor, and catching all sorts of confounded infection. And then I suppose she'll end by marrying that curate that's always about the house. What a shame it is! She used to be such a brick. And to go and marry a curate.”

“I heard of that, too,” said Captain Frank, with a bit of a sigh. It was indeed among the first things he had heard after returning to England.

By this time they had reached Mr. Tom's club, which was pleasantly situated at a corner of the great thoroughfare, so that it had from its coffee-room windows a spacious view, and was altogether a light and cheerful sort of place.

"But you don't ask about the Baby," said Mr. Tom, as he was entering his friend's name in the strangers' book—the Waterloo being a hospitable little club that allowed visitors to come in at any hour. "And the Baby is in a hole."

"Well, it must be a sad thing for a baby to be in a hole; but I don't quite understand," said Captain King.

"Don't you remember the Baby? The youngest? Madge?"

"Oh. Well, I only saw her once, I think. What is the matter with her?"

"First pick out what you want for lunch, and then I'll tell you."

This was easily done; and the two friends sat down at a small window-table, which enabled them to glance out at the passing crowd, and even as far as the Duke of York's column and the tops of the trees in St. James's Park.

"You see my sisters have all been wards in Chancery. "I was also," said Mr. Tom, with a slight blush; for he was no more than six months escaped from tutelage. "I suppose the

executors funk'd something about my father's will ; at all events, they flung the whole thing in. Well, no great harm has come of it ; not so much cost or worry as you would expect. Only the girls have had bad times of it about their sweethearts. I mean the Baby——”

“The Baby ! How old is she ? ”

“Eighteen ; and uncommonly good-looking, I think. Have some sherry. Well, the Baby made the acquaintance at somebody's house of a young fellow—son of a barrister—not a farthing but what he picks up at pool. I don't think she meant anything—I don't a bit. There's a lot of that kind of nonsense goes on down there : Nan is the only one who has kept clear out of it. Well, the guardians didn't see it ; and they went to the Court, and they got the Vice-Chancellor to issue an order forbidding young Hanbury from having any sort of communication with Madge. Now, you know, if you play any games with an order of that sort hanging over you, it's the very devil. It is. Won't you have some pickles ? ”

“And how is Miss Madge affected by the order ? asked Captain King.

“Oh,” said this garrulous youth, who had entirely forgotten his cultivated, reticent manner in meeting this old friend, “she pretends to be greatly hurt, and thinks it cruel and heart-

breaking and all the rest of it ; but that's only her fun, don't you know ? She's precious glad to get out of it, that's my belief ; and nobody knew better than herself he wouldn't do at all. Finished ? Come and have a game at billiards then."

They went upstairs to a long, low-roofed apartment, in which were two tables. They lit cigars, chose their cues, and fell to work. Frank King had not played half-a-dozen strokes when Mr. Tom said, generously—

"I will put you on thirty points."

They played five minutes longer.

"Look here, I will give you another thirty."

"Sixty in a hundred ?" said King, laughing.

"Well, that is rather a confession of bad play."

"Oh, as for that," said Mr. Tom, "I don't see that a naval officer should be ashamed of playing badly at billiards. He should be proud of it. I shan't glory in it if I beat you."

Mr. Tom was really very friendly. After a couple of games or so he said—

"Look here, it's nearly four o'clock. I am going down to Brighton by the 4.30. Will you come down and see my mother and the girls ? I am afraid we can't put you up ; but you can get a bed-room at the Norfolk or Prince's ; and we dine at eight."

Frank King hesitated for a minute or two. Ever since he had come to England he had had a strange wish to see Nan Beresford, even though he had heard she was going to be married. He wished to see whether she had turned out to be what he had predicted to himself; whether she retained those peculiar distinctions of character and expression and manner that had so attracted him; somehow he thought he would like just to shake hands with her for a moment, and see once before him those clear, blue-gray, shy, humorous eyes. But this proposal was too sudden. His heart jumped with a quick dismay. He was not prepared.

Nevertheless, Tom Beresford insisted. Was Captain King staying at a hotel? No; he had got a bed-room in Cleveland Row. That was the very thing; they could stop the hansom there on their way to Victoria Station. The girls would be glad to see him. They had always been watching his whereabouts abroad, in the Admiralty appointments in the newspapers.

At last, with some little unexpressed dread, Frank King consented; and together they made their way to Victoria Station.

"You know," said Mr. Tom, apologetically, in the Pullman, "I've been talking a lot about my sisters; but I tell you honestly I don't see any

girls to beat them anywhere. I don't. The Sentimental is rather stupid, perhaps ; but then she scores by her music. Nan's the one for my money, though. She isn't the prettiest ; but set her down at any dinner-table, and you can lay odds on her against the field. I believe there are a dozen old gentlemen who have got her name in their will—not that she cares for worldly things any more—it is all sanctity now. I wish to goodness somebody would——”

But Mr. Tom had a little discretion. He said no more.

“I suppose they are all very much changed in appearance,” Frank King said, thoughtfully. “I shouldn't be surprised if I scarcely recognised them.”

“Oh, yes, they are. And I will confess that Nan has improved in one way. She isn't as cheeky as she used to be ; she's awfully good-natured—she'd do anything for you. When I get into trouble, I know Nan will be my sheet-anchor.”

“Then I hope the cable will hold,” said Frank King.

They reached Brighton. Tom Beresford found his companion strangely silent and preoccupied. The fact was that Captain Frank was very unusually agitated. He hoped she might not be

alone. Then he strove to convince himself that she must be quite altered now. She must be quite different from the young girl who walked up the Splügen pass with him. Then she was scarcely over seventeen; now she was over twenty. He would see some one he might fail to recognise; not the Nan of former days; not the Nan that had long ago enchained him with her frank odd ways, and her true eyes.

They drove first to a hotel, and secured a bed; then they went to Brunswick Terrace. When they went upstairs to the drawing-room, they found it empty.

"They can't be all out," said Mr. Tom; "I'll go and find them."

He left; and Captain Frank began to try to quiet down this uncalled-for perturbation. Why should he fear to see her? The past was over. Never was any decision given more irrevocably; even if there had been any question as to an open future, that had been disposed of by the news that had met him on his return to England. It ought only to be a pleasure to him to see her. He thought she would welcome him in a kind way; and he would show her that he quite accepted the circumstances as they were. Only—and this he kept repeating to himself—he must expect to be disillusionised. Nan would

no longer be that former Nan. Some of the freshness and the young wonder would be gone ; she would be eligible as a friend ; that, on the whole, was better.

Well, the door opened, and he turned quickly, and then his heart jumped. No ; she had not changed at all, he said to himself, as she advanced towards him with a smile and a frankly extended hand. The same pleasant eyes, the same graceful, lithe figure, the same soft voice, as she said—

“ Oh, how do you do, Captain King ? ”

And yet he was bewildered. There was something strange.

“ I—I am very glad to see you again, Miss Anne,” he stammered.

She looked at him for a moment, puzzled, and then she said, with a quiet smile,—

“ Oh, but I’m not Nan. I see you have forgotten me. I’m Madge.”

CHAPTER XII.

NEW POSSIBILITIES.

“MANY people have told me I am very like what Nan used to be,” continued Miss. Madge, pleasantly. “And there is a photograph of her——. Let me see, where is it?”

She went to a table and opened an album, his eyes following her with wonder and a vague bewildered delight. For this was a new acquisition to the world—another Nan, a Nan free from all hateful ties, a Nan not engaged to be married. Presently she returned with a card in her hand.

“It was taken at Rome the time Nan went to Italy. That’s more than three years now. I think myself it is like me, though it is rather too young for me.”

It was indeed remarkably like this Madge who now stood beside him. But yet sure enough it was Nan—the Nan that he remembered walking about the brilliant hot gardens at Bellagio. Here she was standing at a table, her head bent

down, her hand placed on an open book. It was a pretty attitude, but it hid Nan's eyes.

"Yes, it would do capitally as a portrait of you," he said quickly; "no wonder I was mistaken. And your sister Edith, has she grown up to be like your eldest sister in the same way?"

"Oh no; Edith never was like the rest of us. Edith is dark, you know."

Any further discussion of Miss Edith's appearance was stopped by the entrance of that young lady herself, who was preceded by her mamma. Lady Beresford received Captain King very kindly, and repeated her son's invitation that he should dine with them that evening. And had he seen the Strathernes since his return? And how long did he propose remaining in Brighton? And which hotel was he staying at?

The fact is, Captain King was still a little bewildered. He answered as he best could Lady Beresford's questions, and also replied to some profound remarks of Miss Edith's concerning the rough weather in the Channel; but all the time his eyes were inadvertently straying to the younger girl, who had gone to restore Nan's portrait to its place, and he was astonished to see how this family likeness could extend even to the pose of the figure and the motion of the hand. He could almost have believed now that

that was Nan there, only he had been told that the real Nan—no doubt very much altered—was for the time being staying with some friends at Lewes.

In due time he went away to his hotel to dress for dinner—an operation that was somewhat mechanically performed. He was thinking chiefly of what Mr. Tom had told him at the Waterloo Club concerning the young gentleman who had been warned off by the Vice-Chancellor. He had taken little interest in the story then ; now he was anxious to recollect it. Certainly Miss Madge did not seem to have suffered much from that separation.

When he returned to Brunswick Terrace he found that the only other guest of the evening had arrived, and was in the drawing-room with the family. From the manner in which this gentleman held himself aloof from Miss Edith, and did not even speak to her or appear to recognise her presence, Frank King concluded that he must be Miss Edith's suitor—no other, indeed, than the person whom Mr Tom had called Soda-water. Soda-water, if this were he, was a man of about five-and-thirty, of middle height, fresh complexioned and of wiry build, looking more like an M.F.H., in fact, than anything else. His clothes seemed to fit well, but perhaps that was

because he had a good figure, In the middle of his spacious shirt front shone a large opal, surrounded with small diamonds.

Captain King had the honour of taking Lady Beresford down to dinner, and he sat between her and Miss Madge. It soon became apparent that there was going to be no lack of conversation. John Roberts, the soda-water manufacturer, was a man who had a large enjoyment of life, and liked to let people know it, though without the least ostentation or pretence on his part. He took it for granted that all his neighbours must necessarily be as keenly interested as himself in the horse he had ridden that morning to the meet of the Southdown foxhounds, and in the run from Henderley Wood through the Buxted covers to Crowborough village. But then he was not at all bound up in either foxhounds or harriers. He was as deeply interested as any one present in the fancy-dress ball of the next week, and knew all the most striking costumes that were being prepared. No matter what it was,—old oak, the proposed importation of Chinese servants, port wine, diamonds, black Wedgwood, hunters, furred driving-coats, anything, in short, that was sensible, and practical, and English, and conduced to man's solid comfort and welfare in this far too speculative and

visionary world,—he talked about all such things with vigour, precision, and delight. The substantial, healthy look of him was something in a room. Joy radiated from him. When you heard him describe how damsons could best be preserved, you could make sure that there was a firm and healthy digestion ; he was not one of the wretched creatures who prolong their depressed existence by means of Angostura bitters, and only wake up to an occasional flicker of life at the instigation of sour champagne.

This talk of the joyous Roberts was chiefly addressed to Lady Beresford, so it gave Frank King plenty of opportunity of making the acquaintance of Nan's youngest sister. And she seemed anxious to be very pleasant and kind to him. She wanted to know all about Kingscourt, and what shooting they had had. She told him how they passed the day at Brighton, and incidentally mentioned that they generally walked on the pier in the morning.

"But you won't be going to-morrow, will you?" he said quickly.

"Why not?" she said.

"I am afraid the weather promises to be wild. The wind is south-west, and freshening. Listen!"

There was a faint, intermittent, monotonous rumble outside, that told of the breaking of the sea on the beach.

"That ground swell generally comes before a storm," he said. "I thought it looked bad as I came along."

"Why should you prophecy evil?" she said, petulantly.

"Oh, well, let us look at the chances on the other side," he said, with good-humour. "The best of Brighton is that there is nothing to catch and hold the clouds: so, with a fresh southerly wind you may have them blown away inland, and then you will have breaks of fine weather. And then the streets dry up quickly in Brighton."

"But all that means that it's going to be a wet day," she said, as if he were responsible.

"With breaks, I hope," he answered, cheerfully. "And then, you know, living at Brighton, you ought to be half a sailor—you shouldn't mind a shower."

"Oh, but I do," she said. "It's all very well for Nan to get on her thick boots and her waterproof and go splashing away across ploughed fields. I wonder what the house would be like if every one went on in that way, and came home all over mud."

However, Madge soon repented of her petulance, and was quite attentively kind to the new guest, even reproving him for not attending to his dinner, and letting things pass.

Dinner over, Mr. Tom took his mother's seat, and somewhat grandly sent round the wine. As nobody took any, and as starting subjects of interest was not Mr. Tom's strong point, he suddenly proposed that they should go into the billiard-room and send for the girls. This was acceded to at once.

Now billiards is a game in which a good deal of favour can be shown, in a more or less open way. Mr. Tom, having no one of sufficient skill to match himself against, chose to mark, and directed the remaining four to have a double-handed game. Mr. Roberts immediately declared that Madge and himself would play Captain King and Miss Edith. This was assented to in silence, though Madge did not look well pleased, and the game began.

Very soon Mr. Tom said—

“What's the matter with you, Madge? Are you playing dark? Have you got money on?”

Frank King followed Madge, and it was most extraordinary how she was always missing by a hair's-breadth, and leaving balls over pockets.

“What do you mean, Madge?” Mr. Tom

protested. "Why didn't you put the white ball in and go into baulk?"

"I don't play Whitechapel," said Madge, proudly.

Frank King and his partner seemed to be getting on very well; somehow, Madge and the joyous Roberts did not score.

"Look here," said Mr. Tom, addressing the company at large after she had missed an easy shot, "she's only humbugging; she's a first-rate player; she could give any one of you thirty in a hundred and make you wish you had never been born. I say it's all humbug; she's a first-rate player. Why, she once beat me, playing even!"

But even this protest did not hinder Frank King and Edith coming out triumphant winners; and Madge did not seem at all depressed by her defeat, though she said apologetically to Mr. Roberts that one could not play one's best always.

Mr. Tom perceived that this would not do, so he fell back on pool (penny and six-penny), so that each should fight for his own hand. He himself took a ball, but, being strong and also magnanimous, would have no more than two lives.

Here, however, a strange thing happened.

Frank King's ball was yellow, Madge's green, Mr. Tom's brown. Now, by some mysterious process, that yellow ball was always in a commanding position near the middle of the table, while, when Mr. Tom came to play, the green ball was as invariably under a cushion.

"Well, you *are* a sniggler, Madge," said her brother, becoming very angry. "You play for not a single thing but the cushion. I didn't think you cared so much for two-pence-halfpenny in coppers."

"How can I play out when you follow?" said Madge; but even that flattery of his skill was unavailing.

"Wait a bit," said he; "I'll catch you. You can't always sniggle successfully. Even Roberts himself—I beg your pardon, Mr. Roberts, it was the other Roberts I meant—couldn't always get under the cushion. Wait a bit."

There was no doubt that Madge was a most provoking and persistent sniggler. She would play for nothing, and the consequence was that Frank King, to his own intense astonishment, found himself possessed of his original three lives, while everybody else's lives were slowly dwindling down. She played with such judgment, indeed, that Mr. Tom at length got seriously angry, and began to hit wildly at the

green ball in the savage hope of fluking it, the inevitable result being that he ran in himself twice, and departed from the game, and from the room too, saying he was going to smoke a cigar.

Then these four diverged into various varieties of the game, in all of which Madge was Frank King's champion and instructress; and he was very grateful to her, and tried to do his best, though he was chiefly engaged in thinking that her clear blue-gray eyes were so singularly like Nan's eyes. Indeed, Madge had now to put forth all her skill, for he and she were playing partners against the other two, and it was but little help she got from him.

"I am very sorry," he said to her, after making a fearfully bad shot. "I ought to apologise."

"At all events, don't always leave the red ball over a pocket," she said, sharply; but that may have been less temper than an evidence that she was really in earnest about the game.

Moreover, they came out victors after all, and she was greatly pleased; and she modestly disclaimed what he said about her having done all the scoring, and said she thought he played very well considering how few opportunities he must have had of practising. As she said so—looking

frankly towards him—he thought that was just the way Nan would have spoken. The pleasant and refined expression of the mouth was just the same, and there was the same careless grace of the fair hair that escaped from its bonds in fascinating tangles. He thought her face was a little less freckled than Nan's—perhaps she did not brave the sunlight and the sea air so much.

The evening passed with a wonderful rapidity; when Mr. Tom came back again into the room, followed by a servant bringing seltzer-water and things, they found it was nearly eleven.

“I must bid your mamma good-night and be off,” said Frank King to Madge.

“Oh,” she said, “it is unnecessary; mamma goes to her room early. She will make her excuses to you to-morrow.”

In an instant the pale, pretty face had flushed up.

“I mean when you call again, if you are not going back to London at once,” she stammered.

“Oh no,” he said quite eagerly, “I am not going back to London at once; I may stay here some little time. And, of course, I shall call and see your mamma again if I may—perhaps to-morrow.”

“Then we may see you again,” she said pleasantly, as she offered him her hand. “Good-

night ; Edith and I will leave you to your billiards and cigars. And I hope your prophecies are not going to interfere with our morning walk to-morrow. When there is a heavy sea coming in you see it very well from the New Pier. Good-night."

Miss Madge went upstairs to her room, but instead of composing her mind to sleep, she took out writing materials and wrote this letter :

"Dear old Mother Nan—You won't guess who is below at this moment—11 p.m.—playing billiards with Tom and Mr. Roberts. Captain King. If I were he I would call myself Holford King, for that sounds better. Edith says he is greatly improved, and she always said he was nice-looking. I think he is improved. He was not in uniform, of course, which was a pity, for I remember him before ; but at all events he wore neat, plain gold studs, and not a great big diamond or opal. I can't bear men wearing jewels like that ; why don't they wear a string of pearls round their neck ? I have been in such a fright. H. sent me a letter—not in his own handwriting. Isn't it silly ? I don't want my name in the papers. Tom says they will put him in prison 'like winking' if he is not careful, It is stupid ; and of course I shall not answer it,

or have anything to do with him. Mr. Roberts dined here this evening. I think he has too much to say for himself. I like quiet and gentlemanly men. Captain King and his party got 135 pheasants last Thursday, to say nothing of hares and rabbits; so I suppose they have good shooting. I wish they would ask Tom. *C. J.* has disappeared from Brighton, so far as I can make out; and I believe (*sic*) he is haunting the neighbourhood of Lewes, looking out for a certain old Mother Hubbard. Happily he has got nothing to fear from the Chancery people: I suppose they daren't interfere with the Church. My sealskin coat has come back; it is beautiful now, and I have got a hat and feather exactly the same colour as my Indian red skirt, so I think they will go very well together. The sealskin looks blacker than it was. The sea is rough to-night, but I hope to get down the Pier to-morrow morning. Brighton is fearfully crowded just now, and you should come away from that sleepy old Lewes, and have a look at your friends. Good-night, dear Nan.

“MADGE.”

CHAPTER XIII.

ORMUZD AND AHRIMAN.

THE woman is not born who can quite forget the man who has once asked her to become his wife, even though at the moment she may have rejected the offer without a thought of hesitation. Life with her, as with all of us, is so much a matter of experiment, and so rarely turns out to be what one anticipated, that even when she is married, and surrounded with children, husband, and friends, she cannot but at times bethink herself of that proposal, and wonder what would have happened if she had accepted it. Would her own life have been fuller, happier, less occupied with trivial and sordid cares? Would he have become as great and famous if she had married him, and hampered him with early ties? Might not she—supposing things to have gone the other way—have saved him from utter ruin, and have given him courage and hope? After all, there is nothing more important in the world than human happiness; and as the simple “Yes”

or "No" of maidenhood may decide the happiness of not one but two lives, that is why it is a matter of universal interest in song and story ; and that is why quite elderly people, removed by half a century from such frivolities themselves, but nevertheless possessed of memory and a little imagination, and still conscious that life has been throughout a puzzle and a game of chance, and that even in their case it might have turned out very differently, find themselves awaiting with a strange curiosity and anxiety the decision of some child of seventeen, knowing no more of the world than a baby dormouse.

On the other hand, the woman who does not marry is still less likely to forget such an offer. Here, plainly enough, was a turning-point in her life ; what has happened since she owes to her decision then. And as an unmarried life is naturally and necessarily an unfulfilled life, where no great duty or purpose steps in to stop the gap, it is but little wonder if in moments of disquietude or unrest the mind should travel away in strange speculations, and if the memory of a particular person should be kept very green indeed. Nan Beresford, at the age of twenty, would have been greatly shocked if you had told her that during the past three years she had been almost continually thinking about the

young sailor whom she had rejected at Bellagio. Had she not been most explicit—even eagerly explicit? Had she not experienced an extraordinary sense of relief when he was well away from the place, and when she could prove to herself in close self-examination that she was in no way to blame for what had occurred? She was a little sorry for him, it is true; but she could not believe that it was a very serious matter. He would soon forget that idle dream in the brisk realities of his profession, and he would show that he was not like those other young men who came fluttering round her sisters with their simmering sentimentalities and vain flirtations. Above all, she had been explicit. That episode was over and closed. It was attached to Bellagio; leaving Bellagio, they would leave it also behind. And she was glad to get away from Bellagio.

Yes; Nan would have been greatly shocked if you had told her that during these three years she had been frequently thinking of Frank King—except, of course, in the way any one may think of an officer in her Majesty's Navy, whose name sometimes appears in the Admiralty appointments in the newspapers. Her mind was set on far other and higher things. It was the churches and pictures of Italy that began it—

the frescoes in the cloisters, the patient sculpture, telling of the devotion of lives, even the patient needlework on the altars. She seemed to breathe the atmosphere of an Age of Faith. And when, after a long period of delightful reverie abroad, and mystical enjoyment of music and architecture and painting, all combining to place their noblest gifts at the service of religion, she returned to her familiar home in Brighton, some vague desire still remained in her heart that she might be able to make something beautiful of her life, something less selfish and worldly than the lives of most she saw around her. And it so happened that among her friends those who seemed to her most earnest in their faith and most ready to help the poor and the suffering—those who had the highest ideals of existence and strove faithfully to reach these—were mainly among the High Church folk. Insensibly she drew nearer and nearer to them. She took no interest at all in any of the controversies then raging about the position of the Ritualists in the Church of England; it was persons not principles that claimed her regard; and when she saw that So-and-so and So-and-so in her own small circle of friends were living, or striving to live, pure and noble and self-sacrificing lives, she threw in her lot with them, and she was warmly welcomed.

For Nan was popular in a way. All that acerbity of her younger years had now ripened into a sort of sweet and tolerant good-humour. Tom Beresford called her a Papist, and angrily told her to give up "that incense-dodge;" but he was very fond of her all the same, and honoured her alone with his confidence, and would have no one say any ill of her. Nay, for her sake he consented to be civil to the Rev. Mr. Jacomb.

Of Charles Jacomb it needs only be said at present that he had recently been transferred to an extremely High Church at Brighton from an equally High Church in a large, populous, and poor parish in the south-east of London, where the semi-Catholic services had succeeded in attracting a considerable number of people, who otherwise would probably have gone to no church at all. It was his description of his work in this neighbourhood that had won for him the respect and warm esteem of Nan Beresford. The work was hard. The services were almost continuous; there was a great deal of visitation to be got through; in these labours he naturally ran against cases of distress that no human being could withstand; and he had £60 a year. Moreover, there were no delicate compensations such as attend the labours of curates in some more favoured places. There was not—Mr.

Jacomb emphatically remarked—there was not a gentleman in the parish. When he went to Brighton he had considerably less work, and a great deal more of dinners and society, and pleasant attentions. And Mr. Jacomb, while he was a devoted, earnest, and hardworking priest, was also an Englishman, and liked his dinner, and that was how he became acquainted with the Beresfords, and gradually grew to be an intimate friend of the family. His attentions to Nan were marked, and she knew it. She knew, although he had said nothing to her about it, that he wished her to be his wife; and though she would rather have been enabled to devote her life to some good end in some other way, was not this the only way open to her? By herself, she was so helpless to do anything. So many of her friends seemed to cultivate religion as a higher species of emotion—a sort of luxurious satisfaction that ended with themselves. Nan wanted to do something. If Mr. Jacomb had still been in the south-east of London, working on his £60 a year, Nan would have had no doubt as to what she ought to do.

But Nan had very serious doubts; more than that, she sometimes broke down, and delivered herself over to the devil. At such times a strange yearning would take possession of her;

the atmosphere of exalted religious emotion in which she lived would begin to feel stifling ; at all costs, she would have to get out of this hot-house, and gain a breath of brisk sea air. And then she would steal away like a guilty thing on one of her long land cruises along the coast ; and she would patiently talk to the old shepherds on the downs, and wait for their laconic answers ; and she would make observations to the coast-guardsmen about the weather ; and always her eyes, which were very clear and longsighted, were on the outlook for Singing Sal. Then if by some rare and happy chance she did run across that free-and-easy vagrant, they always had a long chat together—Sal very respectful, the young lady very matter-of-fact ; and generally the talk came round to be about sailors. Nan Beresford had got to know the rig of every vessel that sailed the sea. Further than that, she herself was unaware that every morning as she opened the newspaper she inadvertently turned first of all to the “Naval and Military Intelligence,” until she had acquired an extraordinary knowledge of the goings and comings and foreign stations of her Majesty’s ships. And if she sometimes reflected that most officers were transferred to home stations for a time, or took their leave in the ordinary way, and also that she

had never heard of Captain King—for she saw he had been made Commander on account of some special service—being in England, was it not natural that she might have a secret consciousness that she was perhaps responsible for his long banishment?

But these solitary prowls along the coast, and these conferences with Singing Sal, were wrong; and she knew they were wrong; and she went back to the calmer atmosphere of those beautiful services in which the commonplace, vulgar world outside was forgotten. She grew, indeed, to have a mysterious feeling that to her the Rev. Charles Jacomb personified religion, and that Singing Sal, in like manner, was a sort of high priestess of Nature; and that they were in deadly antagonism. They were Ormuzd and Ahriman. She was a strangely fanciful young woman, and she dwelt much on this thing, until, half fearing certain untoward doubts and promptings of her heart, she began to think that if now and at once Mr. Jacomb would only ask her to be his wife, she would avoid all perils and confusions by directly accepting him, and so decide her future for ever.

But that morning that brought her Madge's letter saying that Captain Frank King was in Brighton, Nan was singularly disturbed. She

was staying with the Rev. Mr. Clark and his wife—an old couple who liked to have their house brightened occasionally by the presence of some one of younger years. They were good people—very, very good; and a little tedious. Nan, however, was allowed considerable liberty, and was sometimes away the whole day from breakfast-time till dinner.

Madge had written her letter in a hurry; but did not post it, in her inconsequential fashion, until the afternoon of the next day, so that Nan got it on the morning of the following day. She read and re-read it; and then, somehow, she wanted to think about it in the open—under the wide skies, near the wide sea. She wanted to go out—and think. And she was a little bit terrified to find that her heart was beating fast.

She made some excuse or other after breakfast, and departed. It was a clear, beautiful December morning, the sun shining brilliantly on the evergreens and on the red houses of the bright, clean, picturesque, English-looking old town. She went down to the station, and waited for the first train going to Newhaven. When it came in, she took her place, and away the train went, at no breakneck speed, down the wide valley of the Ouse, which, even on this cold December morning, looked pleasant and cheerful enough.

For here and there the river caught a steely-blue light from the sky overhead; and the sunshine shone along the round chalk hills; and there were little patches of villages far away among the dusk of the leafless trees, where the church spire rising into the blue seemed to attract the wheeling of pigeons. To Nan it was all a familiar scene; she frequently spent the day in this fashion.

Nan was now three years older than when we last saw her at Bellagio. Perhaps she had not grown much prettier—and she never had great pretensions that way; but along with the angularity, so to speak, of her ways of thinking, she had also lost the boniness of her figure. She was now more fully formed, though her figure was still slender and graceful; and she had acquired a grave and sweet expression, that spoke of a very kindly, humorous, tolerant nature within. Children came to her readily; and she let them pull her hair. She was incapable of a harsh judgment. The world seemed beautiful to her; and she enjoyed living—especially when she was on the high downs overlooking the sea.

This getting out into the open was on this occasion a great relief to her. She argued with herself. What did it matter to her whether

Frank King were in Brighton, or even that he had been at the house in Brunswick Terrace, dining, and playing billiards? He had probably forgotten that ever he had been at Bellagio. She was glad the weather was fine. No doubt her sisters would soon be setting out for their morning stroll down the pier.

Nan had taken her ticket for Newhaven wharf, with a vague intention of walking from thence by the short cut to Seaford, and from Seaford to Alfriston and so back to Lewes. However, when the train stopped she thought she would have a look at the harbour, and very pretty and bright and busy it appeared on this clear morning; the brass and copper of the steamers all polished up, flags flying, the sun brilliant on the green water of the estuary and on the blue water of the ponds beyond that were ruffled with the wind. Then, just below her, came in the ferry-boat. She thought she would cross (though that was not the way to Seaford). When she got to the other side, the slopes leading up to the fort seemed temptingly high; she knew that from the summit of the downs this morning one would have a splendid view. And so, perhaps from mere habit, she took the old familiar road—past the coastguard station, past the pools of ruffled water, up the valley by the farmstead, and so on

to the high and solitary downs overlooking the wide, moving, shining sea.

Brighton ought to be fair and beautiful on such a morning as this ; perhaps by-and-by she might come to have a glimpse of the pale yellow terraces of the distant town. No doubt by this time Edith and Madge were on the pier—Madge with her red skirt and black sealskin coat. Madge always dressed smartly—perhaps even a trifle boldly. The band would be playing now. In the sheltered places it would be almost warm ; there you could sit down and talk and watch the ships go by. She supposed that in course of time they would go back for luncheon. That was always a merry meal at home. They generally had visitors whom they had met casually—on the pier, or in the King's Road.

So Nan was thinking and dreaming as she walked idly along, when her attention was suddenly arrested by a sound as of music. She looked round ; there was no human being in sight ; and the telegraph wires, which sometimes deceived the ear, were far too far away. Then as she went on again, she discovered whence the sound proceeded—from a little wooden hut facing the sea, which had probably been erected there as a shelter for the coastguardsmen. As she drew nearer, she recognised the staccato

twanging of a guitar ; so she made sure this was Singing Sal. She drew nearer still—her footsteps unheard on the smooth turf—and then she discovered that Sal was singing away to herself, not for amusement, as was her wont, but for practice. There were continual repetitions. Nan got quite close to the hut, and listened.

Singing Sal was doing her very best. She was singing with very great effect ; and she had a hard, clear voice that could make itself heard, if it was not of very fine quality. But what struck Nan was the clever fashion in which this woman was imitating the Newcastle burr. It was a pitman's song, with a refrain something like this—

Ho thy way, my bonnie bairn,*
Ho thy way, upon my airm,
Ho thy way, thou still may learn
To say Dada sae bonnie.

It was very clear that Sal was proud of her performance ; and she had a good right to be, for she had caught the guttural accent to perfection. For the rest it was an instructive song to be sung as a lullaby to a child ; for this was

* A corruption, I am told, of “hand thy way”—“hold on thy way.” The song is a common one in the North of England.

what Nan more or less made out amid the various experiments and repetitions :—

Oh, Johnnie is a clever lad ;
Last neet he fuddled all he had ;
This morn he wasna very bad ;
He looked the best of ony !

When Johnnie's drunk he'll tak a knife,
And threaten sair to hae my life :
Wha wadna be a pitman's wife,
To hae a lad like Johnnie !

Yonder's Johnnie coming noo ;
He looks the best of a' the crew !
They've all gone to the barley moo,
To hae a glass wi' Johnnie.

So let's go get the bacon fried,
And let us mak a clean fireside,
And when he comes he will thee ride
Upon his knee sae cannie.

Ho thy way, my bonnie bairn,
Ho thy way, upon my airm,
Ho thy way, thou still may learn
To say Dada sae bonnie !

But this was likely to go on for ever ; so Nan quietly stepped round to the door of the hut, where she found Singing Sal sitting on the little cross bench, entirely occupied with her guitar and the new song. When she looked up, on finding the door darkened, she did not scream ; her nerves were not excitable.

“Oh, dear me, is it you, Miss?” she said. “No wonder I did not hear ye; for I was making enough noise myself. I hope you are very well, Miss; it is many a day since I have seen you on the downs.”

“I have been living in Lèwes for some time,” said Nan. “I have been listening to the song you were singing. That is not the kind of song that sailors like, is it?”

So they had begun about sailors again; and the good genius Ormuzd was clean forgotten.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT HOME.

ALL that night, as Frank King had feared, a heavy gale from the south-west raged furiously ; the wind shaking the houses with violent gusts ; the sea thundering along the beach. But in the morning, when Brighton awoke, it found that the worst of the storm had passed over, leaving only a disturbed and dangerous look about the elements, and also a singular clearness in the air, so that the low hard colours of water and land and sky were strangely intense and vivid. Near the shore the sea had been beaten into a muddy brown ; then that melted into a cold green farther out ; and that again deepened and deepened until it was lost in a narrow line of ominous purple, black just where the sea met the vague and vaporous gray sky. In fact, at this moment, the seaward view from any Brighton window resembled nothing so much as an attempt at water-colour that a schoolgirl has got into a hopeless mess through washing and washing

away at her skies, until she has got her heaviest colour smudged over the horizon-line.

But then that was only temporary. Every few minutes another change would steal over this strange, shifting, clear, dark world. Sometimes a long streak of sunny green—as sharp as the edge of a knife—far out at sea told that there was some unseen rift declaring itself overhead in that watery sky. Then a pale grayness would come up from the south-west and slowly cover over Worthing as with a veil; and then again that could be seen to go trailing away inland, and the long spur beyond the bay appear blacker than ever. Sometimes too, as if in contrast with all these cold hard tones and colours, a wonder of light would slowly concentrate on the far cliffs in the east, until Seaford Head became a mass of glorified golden white, hung apparently between sea and sky. Altogether, it was not a day to tempt fashionable folk to go out for their accustomed promenade; and assuredly it was not a day, supposing them bent on going out, to suggest that they should be too elaborate about their costume.

Nevertheless, when Miss Madge Beresford came into the billiard-room, where her brother was patiently practising the spot stroke, her appearance seemed to produce a great effect.

“Well, we *have* got on a swagger dress this time !” cried Mr. Tom, who, though he had never been to Oxford, was a genuine free-trader in slang, and was ready to import it from anywhere.

He stared at her—at her dark Indian-red hat and skirt, and her long tight-fitting black seal-skin coat—and she bore the scrutiny patiently.

“You are not going out on a morning like this ?” he said, at length.

“There is no rain now ; and the streets are quite dry,” pleaded Madge. “I know it’s going to be fine.”

“It’s no use, Baby. There won’t be a soul to admire your new dress. Better go and finish those slippers for me.”

He proceeded with his billiards.

“Won’t you come, Tom ?” she said. “I went to the bazaar with you, when you wanted to see Kate Harman.”

“Wanted to see Kate Harman ?” he said, contemptuously. “Couldn’t anybody see Kate Harman who paid half-a-crown at the door ?”

“But I took you up and introduced you to her.”

“Introduced me to her ! What introduction do you need at a stall at a bazaar, except to pay a couple of sovereigns for a shilling’s worth of scent ? Who told you I wanted to speak to

Kate Harman ? I'll tell you what it is, Baby ; it's very unladylike to impute motives."

"I never did anything of the kind," said his sister, hotly. "Never."

She did not quite understand what accusation had been brought against her ; but she did not like the sound of the word "unladylike."

"Very well," said he, laying down his cue, "since you say I am incapable of speaking the truth, I suppose I must go and walk up and down the pier with you. There's one thing sure : *I* shan't be stared at."

So he went and got his hat and cane and gloves, and when he had buttoned himself all over into the smallest possible compass, he called for his sister, and together they went out into the gusty, clear, sea-scented morning.

They had the spacious thoroughfare nearly to themselves, though the pavements were fairly dry now. For the day was wild-looking still, the occasional gleam of sunlight was spectral and watery, and a black shadow melting into a soft gray told of showers falling far away at sea. At a great many drawing-room windows, coffee-room windows, club windows, were people standing, their hands behind their back, apparently uncertain whether or not to venture out. And no doubt some of these, remarking Tom and Madge

Beresford pass, must have thought they formed a very handsome couple—the tall, well-built young fellow who looked three-and-twenty, though he was not so much, and the pretty girl of eighteen who also had a good figure and walked well. Their features were much alike too; most would have guessed them to be brother and sister.

“I observe,” remarked Mr. Tom, profoundly, as he gazed with admiration at his own boots, “that when I come out with you, Baby, I have to do all the talking. When I go out with Nan, now, she does it all and I am amused. It isn’t that I am selfish; but a girl come to your time of life—a woman indeed—ought to cultivate the art of amusing people. There is a want of originality about you——”

“There is a want of politeness about you,” said Miss Madge, calmly.

“There is not that flow of ideas that helps one to pass the time. Now that ought to be the business of women. Men who have the hard work of the world to get through require to be entertained, and women should make a study of it, and learn to be amusing——”

“You won’t talk like that to your rich widow,” said his sister, “when you have to go to her for a cheque.”

"Now, there's what I would call a sort of vacuity in your mind," he continued, bending his cane from time to time on the pavement, "that might be filled up with something. You might read the newspapers. You might get to know that a Conservative Government and a Liberal Government are not in office at the same time—not generally, at least."

"Tom," she said, "do you think you could get Captain King to come to the Hunt ball?"

He glanced at her suspiciously.

"Captain King?" said he. "How do you know I am going to see Captain King again? How do you know that he did not go back to town this morning?"

"Because," she answered, with her eyes fixed on some distant object, "because I can see him on the pier."

Tom Beresford had a quick, dark suspicion that he had been made a fool of, even while he was lecturing his sister on her ignorance; but he was not going to admit anything of the kind.

"Yes," he said, carelessly, "I fancy that is King coming along. I hope he won't be gone before we get there; I want him to tell me where he gets his boots. Mine aren't bad, you know," he said, glancing approvingly at these important

objects, "but there's a style about his that I rather fancy."

"Don't forget about the ball, Tom," said his sister; "it would be very nice if we could get up a little party amongst ourselves."

But Tom, as he walked along, continued to glance down at his glazed boots in a thoughtful and preoccupied manner; it was clear that his mind was charged concerning them.

Frank King was on the pier, and very few others besides, except the musicians in their box. He threw away a cigar, and came forward quickly. His face expressed much pleasure, though he regarded Madge Beresford with something of timidity.

"I was afraid you would not venture out on such a morning," he said, looking at the clear blue-gray eyes that were immediately turned away.

Her manner was civil, but that was all. She shook hands with him, of course, and regarded him for half a second; but then she turned aside somewhat, so that he and Tom might talk together. For he was Mr. Tom's friend, and no doubt they might have something to say to each other about boots or cigars, or such things.

However, the three of them very soon found themselves walking together, up towards the end

of the empty pier, and Tom was in an amazingly good humour, and did his best to amuse this new friend. They sat down where they were sheltered from the gusts of wind, and listened a little to the music, and talked a great deal—though Madge chiefly listened. Madge pretended to be mostly interested in the music, and in the few more people who had now been tempted to come down the pier; but she knew that while her brother and Captain King were very busy talking, the latter was very frequently regarding her. What she did not know was that he was trying to make himself believe that that was Nan who was sitting there.

Then they went for a stroll again, and they looked at the kiosques, and they took refuge from a few passing drops of rain; and they hurried to see a heavy fishing smack go by the end of the pier, beating out against the south-westerly wind. And although Frank King again and again addressed her, as was demanded of him, she did not enter much into conversation with him. He was Tom's friend, she let it be understood. Nevertheless, she met his eyes once or twice, and she had a pleasant and amiable look.

She began to think that there must be something very striking and attractive about this young sailor, when even her brother Tom—who

seemed to consider that the whole world should wait upon his highness—so clearly went out of his way to make himself agreeable. Not only that, but when they had had enough of the pier, and had taken a stroll or two along the King's Road, bringing the time to nearly one o'clock, what must Mr. Tom do but insist that Frank King should come in and lunch with them?

"Well, I will," said he, "if you will dine with me at the hotel in the evening. Dining by yourself at a hotel is not exhilarating."

"But you'd far better dine with us too," said Mr. Tom, boldly.

"Oh, I can't do that," said Frank King—but with a slight increase of colour, which showed that he wished he could. "Even as it is, I am afraid Lady Beresford will think it rather cool if I turn up again now."

"Oh, you don't know what Brighton is at this time of year," said Mr. Tom. "All the resident people like ourselves keep open house, don't you know? and very glad to. We never know how many are coming in to lunch; but then they put up with anything; and it's great fun; it's an occupation for idle people. Then, when you've got a billiard-table, they can turn to that on wet days. Or Edith can give them some music; they say she's rather a swell at it. You see,

everybody is in Brighton in December, with friends or in hotels ; and, as I say, it's a case of open house and take your chance."

"We are more formal, and a little duller, in Wiltshire," said Frank King. "I wish you'd come to Kingscourt for a few days. We haven't shot the best of the covers yet."

Those who thought that Tom Beresford was a foolish youth knew nothing about him. Without a hum or a ha he said—

"Yes, I will. When?"

"I'm going back for Christmas. Of course you'll have to stay here with your sisters. As soon after that as you can manage."

"I could come to you on the 27th or 28th."

"That's settled, then. I will write and let you know about trains and things."

As luck, good or ill, would have it, there was no other visitor at lunch ; the party consisting of Lady Beresford, her two daughters, Mr. Tom, and Captain Frank King. But Mr. Tom was in high spirits over this prospective visit to Kingscourt, and was most amiable to everybody and everything ; he even said that he himself would go through to Lewes and fetch Nan home for Christmas.

Now this was odd : that, whenever Nan's name was mentioned, Frank King always glanced

up with a quick look, as if he were surprised. Was he beginning to believe, then, as he had tried to make himself believe, that this was the real Nan Beresford now on the other side of the table? Was he surprised to be reminded of the other Nan far away—and now no doubt greatly altered from her former self? Madge Beresford was aware that her neighbour opposite regarded her very frequently—and she pretended not to be conscious of it; but once or twice, when she looked up and her eyes met his, she thought there was an oddly wistful or even puzzled expression in those dark blue eyes that Edith was always talking about.

After luncheon Lady Beresford retired to her room, as was her wont; the two young ladies went upstairs to the drawing-room, and Captain King accompanied them, for Madge had asked him to advise her about the rigging of some boats she had been sketching. Mr. Tom remained below to practise the spot stroke.

In the drawing-room Miss Edith hoped that her playing a little would not interfere with their artistic pursuits; and Madge went and got her sketch-book and water-colours, and carried them to a small table at one of the windows, and sat down. Captain King remained standing.

The sketches, to tell the truth, were as bad as

bad could be. They were all experimental things, done out of her own head, aiming at a land of the beautiful, unknown to anybody on earth but the chromo-lithographer. The actual sea was out there, staring her in the face, and there were boats on the beach and boats on the water; but instead of trying her hand at anything before her, she must needs imagine lovely pictures, mostly of blue and pink, with goats perched on brown crags, and an ill-drawn eagle soaring over an Alpine peak. There were, however, one or two sketches of mist or moonlight or thunder-storm that had certainly a weird and eerie effect; but it was not necessary to tell the spectator that these had been got in moments of impatience when, after laborious trials at brilliant-hued scenes, the angry artist had taken up a big brush and washed the whole thing into chaos—thereby, to her astonishment, reaching something, she did not know exactly what, that was at all events mysterious and harmonious in tone.

But it was the shipping about which she had sought his advice. The little white dots on blue lakes that were supposed to be feluccas or barchettas he passed; but when it came to a big sailing-boat lying on a beach, and that beach presumably Cornish, from the colour of the

rocks, he made a civil and even timid remonstrance.

"I don't think I would have the mast quite in the middle of the boat, if I were you," said he, gently.

"I thought it always was," she said—and yet if she had gone to the window she might have seen.

"If it is a lugger, you see," he continued, giving her all sorts of chances of escape, "the mast would be at the bow. And if it is a cutter, you would still have to put the mast farther forward, and give her a boom and a bowsprit. Or if it is a yawl, then you would have a little jigger-mast astern—about there——"

"Oh, I can't be expected to know things like that," she said. "Scientific accuracy isn't wanted. They're only sketches."

"Yes ; oh yes," he said.

"Won't that boat do ?" she demanded.

"Oh yes, it will do," he said, fearful of offending her. "It isn't exactly where they put masts, you know ; but then few people know about boats or care about them."

She was not very well pleased ; but she continued to show him more sketches, until Mr. Tom came up to see when they were coming to billiards.

"I shouldn't have shown you these at all," she said. "I don't take interest in them myself. I would far rather draw and paint flowers; but we never have any flowers now except those waxen-looking heaths and that flaming pointsettia over there."

"What did you call it, Madge?" said Mr. Tom.

"I called it pointsettia," she said, with dignity.

"Gamekeeper's Greek, I should say," he remarked with his hands in his pockets. "A cross between a pointer and a setter. You shouldn't use long words, Madge. Come along down."

But this mention of flowers put a new idea into the head of Captain Frank King. That very morning he had passed a window where he had seen all sorts of beautiful blossoms, many of them lying in cotton wool—pink and white camellias, white hyacinths, scarlet geraniums, lilies of the valley, and what not. Now might he not be permitted to send Miss Margaret a selection of these rare blossoms—not as a formal bouquet at all, but merely for the purposes of painting? They would simply be materials for an artist; and they would look well in a pretty basket, on a soft cushion of wool.

CHAPTER XV.

A MESSAGE.

FRANK KING could never exactly define what peculiarities of mind, or person, or manner it was that had so singularly attracted him in Nan Beresford, though he had spent many a meditative hour on board ship in thinking about her. In any case, that boyish fancy was one that a few years' absence might very well have been expected to cure. But the very opposite had happened. Perhaps it was the mere hopelessness of the thing that made him brood the more over it, until it took possession of his life altogether. He kept resolutely abroad, so that he had but few chances of falling in love with somebody else, which is the usual remedy in such cases. When at length he was summoned home, about the first news that reached him was of Nan's contemplated marriage. He was not surprised. And when he consented to go down to Brighton with her brother, it was that he might have just one more glimpse of one whom

he always had known was lost to him. He had nothing to reproach her or himself with. It was all misfortune, and nothing more. But his life had been changed for him by that mere boyish fancy.

Then came that wonderful new hope. Nan was away ; Nan was impossible ; but here was the very counterpart of Nan ; and why should he not transfer all that lingering love and admiration from the one sister to the other who so closely resembled her ? It was the prompting of despair as much as anything else. He argued with himself. He tried to make himself believe that this was really Nan—only grown a year or so older than the Nan whom he had last seen at Como. Of course there must be differences ; people changed with the changing years. Sometimes he turned away, so that he might only hear her ; and her voice was like Nan's.

Now, if Frank King was busy persuading himself that this transference of affection was not only natural and possible, but indeed the easiest and simplest thing in the world, it must be admitted that he obtained every help and encouragement from Madge Beresford herself. She was more than kind to him ; she was attentive ; she professed great respect for his opinions ; and she did her best to conceal—or rather let us say

subdue—her bad temper. And they were very much together during these two or three days. Frank King, being on such intimate terms of friendship with Mr. Tom, had almost become an inmate of the house. His being carried off to lunch, when they met him in the morning, was a matter of course. Then he watched Madge paint, and listened to Edith's music ; or they all went downstairs and played billiards, and by that time it was the hour for the afternoon promenade. It was no matter to them that December afternoons are short, and sometimes cold ; one's health must be preserved despite the weather ; and then again, Brighton looked very picturesque in the gathering dusk, with the long rows of her golden lamps. To observe this properly, however, you ought to go out on the pier ; and although at that hour at that time of the year there is not a human being to be found there, that need not interfere with your appreciation of the golden-lit spectacle.

Moreover, Mr. Tom was a tyrant. When he had settled that Captain King might as well remain to dinner, instead of going away to dine by himself at his hotel, it was no use for Captain King to resist. And then Tom's invitation, for mere courtesy sake, had to be repeated by Lady Beresford, and prettily seconded by the two girls.

No such favours, be it observed, were showered on the effervescent Roberts or on young Thynne : Mr. Tom had taken the sailor suitor under his protection ; there was to be a distinction drawn.

One night, just after Frank King had left, Tom and his sister were by themselves in the billiard-room.

"I want to speak to you, Madge," said he, in a tone that meant something serious.

"Very well, then."

"Now, none of your airs and pretence," he said. "You needn't try to gammon me."

"If you would talk English, one might understand you," she said, spitefully:

"You understand me well enough. When you were on the pier this morning your eyes were just as wide open as anybody's. And again this afternoon, when you were up on the Marine Parade."

Madge flushed a little, but said nothing.

"You know as well as anybody that that fellow Hanbury is hanging about," said Tom, regarding her with suspicion. "He is always loitering round, dodging after you. And I won't have it. I'll write to the Chief Clerk if he doesn't mind."

"I don't suppose the Chief Clerk and the

Vice-Chancellor and the whole lot of them," said Madge, pretending to be much interested in the tip of her cue, "can expel a person from Brighton who is doing no harm."

"Doing no harm? If you didn't encourage him, do you think he'd hang about like that? If he knew distinctly you wanted him to be off, do you think he'd spend his time slinking about the streets? I believe he has been writing to you again."

This was quite a random shot, but it told.

"He sent me one letter—not in his own handwriting," Madge confessed, diffidently.

"Show it to me!"

"I can't. I burned it. I was afraid. Tom, you wouldn't get the poor fellow into trouble!"

"I've no patience with you!" he said angrily. "Why can't you be fair and above-board? Why don't you send the fellow about his business at once——"

"Well, I have."

"Why don't you settle the thing straight? You know Frank King wants to marry you: anybody can see that. Why don't you have him, and be done with it?"

Madge turned away a little, and said with a very pretty smile,

"And so I would, if he would ask me."

Well, Mr. Tom thought he knew something of the ways of womankind, from having been brought up among so many ; but this fairly took his breath away. He stared at her. He laid down his cue.

“ Well, I’m smashed,” he said at length. And then he added slowly, “ I’m glad I’ve got nothing to do with you women. I believe you’d roast any fellow alive, and then cut him into bits for fourpence-halfpenny. It isn’t more than three months since you were crying your eyes out about that fellow Hanbury——”

“ You were as anxious as any one he should be sent away,” retorted Madge. “ It appears I can’t please every one. Perhaps, on the whole, it would be as well to continue the game, for I only want three to be out.”

Tom gave up. He continued the game, and played so savagely and so well that poor Madge never got her three. And he did not recur to that subject except to say the last thing at night, as the girls were leaving—

“ Look here, Madge, that fellow Hanbury had better take care.”

“ I suppose he can look after himself,” said Madge. “ I have nothing to do with him. Only you can’t expect me not to be sorry for him. And how am I to send him away when I dare not

“speak to him? And do you think the streets of Brighton belong to me?”

Tom again gave up, but was more convinced than ever that women were strange creatures, who could not be straightforward even when they tried. From that and similar generalisations, however, he invariably excepted Nan. Nan did not belong to womankind as considered as a section of the human race. Nan was Nan.

The next afternoon Captain King called to say good-bye. He found the girls very busy over Christmas cards. Madge was painting little studies of flowers for exceptionally favoured people, and she invited him to look over these.

“They are very pretty,” he said. “I hope the people who are fortunate enough to get them will value them. I mean they are not like ordinary Christmas cards.”

“Oh, if you like them,” said Madge, modestly, “you might take one for yourself.”

“May I?” he said, regarding her, “and may I choose the one?”

“Oh yes, certainly,” she answered.

“I know the one I should like to take,” he said, still regarding her. “This one.”

It was a little bit of forget-me-not, very nicely painted—from memory. He showed it to her.

"May I take this one with me?" he said.

"Yes," she answered in a very low voice, and with her eyes cast down.

After that there was a brief silence, only broken by the sound of Miss Edith's pen, that young lady being at the other side of the table, addressing envelopes.

Captain Frank went back to Wiltshire, greatly treasuring that bit of cardboard, and making it the basis of many audacious guesses at the future. Nan came home from Lewes for Christmas; and Madge was particularly affectionate towards her.

"What pretty flowers you have!" Nan said, just after she had arrived—the first time, indeed, she went into the dining-room.

"Yes," Madge answered, "Captain King sent me flowers once or twice, and some of them have kept very well. But I wish they wouldn't wire them."

Nan turned away quickly towards the window, and said nothing.

Then Tom went down to Wiltshire, and was most warmly received at Kingscourt. Also pretty Mary Coventry, who was still staying in the house, was kind to this handsome, conceited boy; and he was rather smitten; but he kept a tight hold on himself. "No," he said to himself,

“I’m not going to marry any woman ; I know too much about them.”

He had a royal time of it altogether ; but most of all he enjoyed the quieter days, when he and Frank King went shooting rabbits on the heath. It was sharp, brisk work in the cold weather, better than standing in wet ploughed fields outside woods and waiting until both toes and fingers got benumbed. There was no formality in this business, and no ladies turning up at lunch, and no heart-breaking when one missed. Frank King was excessively kind to him. Not caring very much for shooting himself, he was content to become Mr. Tom’s henchman ; and they got on very well together. Further, in the smoking-room at night these two were thrown on each other’s conversation—for old Mr. King did not smoke—and it was remarkable how interesting Captain King found his friend’s talk. It was mostly about Madge and her sisters ; and Frank King listened eagerly, and always would have Mr. Tom have another cigarette, while he was busy drawing imaginative pictures, and convincing himself more and more that Madge was no other than Nan, and that life had begun again for him, with all sorts of beautiful possibilities in it. For he could not be blind to the marked favour that the young lady had shown him ; and

he had long ceased to have any fear of the shadowy Hanbury who was skulking somewhere unregarded in the background.

At length one night Captain Frank, in a burst of confidence, told Mr. Tom all about it, and asked him to say honestly what he thought the chances were. Would Lady Beresford have any objection? Would Miss Margaret consider he had not known her sufficiently long or intimately? What was Mr. Tom's own opinion?

Mr. Tom flushed uneasily.

"I—well, you see—I keep out of that kind of thing as a rule. Women have such confounded queer ways. You're sure to put your foot into it if you intermeddle. These girls are always worrying people about their sweethearts—all but Nan. I wish to goodness they were all married; my life is made a burden to me amongst them."

"But what do you think, Beresford? Haven't you any opinion? What would you do in a similar case?"

"I?" said Mr. Tom, with a laugh, "I suppose I should ask the girl; and if she didn't like to say yes, she could do the other thing."

"But—do you think there would be a chance?"

"Write and see," said Mr. Tom, with another

laugh ; further than that he would not interfere.

Frank considered for a time ; and at last boldly determined to act on this advice. He sat up late that night, concocting a skilful, cautious, appealing letter ; and as he re-wrote it carefully, all by himself, in the silence, it seemed to him almost as if he were beseeching Nan to reconsider the verdict she had given at Bellagio more than three years before. Life would begin all over again if only she would say yes. Sometimes he found himself thinking of that ball in Spring Gardens ; and of her startled shyness, and of her winning confidence, and anxious wish to please ; until he recollected that it was Madge to whom he was writing, and that Madge had never been to the ball at all.

This fateful missive was left to be despatched the first thing in the morning ; and at the very least there must needs be two or three days' interval. But it cannot be said that he passed this time in terrible anxiety. He was secretly hopeful ; so much so that he had begged Mr. Tom, who ought to have gone back before this time, to wait another day or so. His private reason was that he hoped to accompany Madge's brother to Brighton.

All the same, the crisis of a man's life cannot

approach without causing some mental disturbance, even in the most hopeful. Long before the Kingscourt family had assembled round the breakfast-table, Frank King had ridden over, on these two or three cold mornings, to the postal town, which was nearly two miles off, so that he should not have to wait for the arrival of the bag. And at last came a letter with the Brighton postmark. He glanced at the handwriting, and thought it was Madge's. That was enough. He put it in his pocket without opening it; went out and got on his horse; and went well outside the little town into the quietude of the lanes before putting his hand into his pocket again and taking the letter out.

No, he was not very apprehensive about the result, or he could not have carried the letter thus far unopened. But all the same the contents surprised him. He had expected, at the worst, some mild refusal on the ground of haste; and, at the best, an evasive hint that he might come to Brighton and talk to Lady Beresford. But all the writing on this sheet of paper consisted of two words, "*From Madge*;" and what accompanied them was a bit of forget-me-not—not painted, this time, but a bit of the real flower. It was a pretty notion. It confessed much, without saying much. There was a sort of

maiden reticence about it, and yet kindness, and hope. What Frank King did not know was this—that it was Nan Beresford who had suggested that answer to his letter.

He never knew how he got home that morning. He was all in a tempest of eagerness and delight; he scarcely lived in to-day—it was next day. It was the future that seemed to be around him. He burst into his friend's bed-room before the breakfast gong had sounded.

“Beresford, I'll go with you whenever you like now. Whenever you like. I'm going to Brighton with you, I mean.”

“Oh, that's it, is it?” said Mr. Tom, without looking up—he was tying his shoes.

“I've heard from your sister, you know——”

“I thought so. It's all right then, is it?”

“I hope so. I'm very glad it's settled. And you know I don't want to turn you out of the house; but you've been very kind, waiting a day or two longer; and I *should* like to get to Brighton at once.”

“I'll start in five minutes, if you like,” said Mr. Tom, coolly, having finished with his shoes. “And I suppose I ought to congratulate you. Well, I do. She's a very good sort of girl. Only——”

He hesitated. It was inauspicious.

“What do you mean?” said Captain Frank.

“Well, I’ve seen a good deal about women and their goings on, don’t you know?” said Mr. Tom, with a sort of shrug. “They’re always changing and chopping and twisting about. The best way is to marry them offhand, and take the nonsense out of them.”

Captain Frank laughed. This was not at all alarming. And when it became secretly known that Captain Frank was immediately going to Brighton to secure his promised bride, there was a great, though discreet rejoicing at Kingscourt; and even pretty Mary Coventry came with her demure and laughing congratulations; and Mr. Tom was made more of than ever during the few hours longer that he remained in the house. Frank King had not time to think about Nan now; it was Madge Beresford who had sent him that bit of forget-me-not.

CHAPTER XVI.

REVERIES.

No sooner had Nan come back to Brighton again, and been installed once more in her former position, than the whole house seemed to be pervaded by a quite new sense of satisfaction, the cause of which was not even guessed at. The wheels of the domestic machinery worked far more smoothly; even the servants seemed to partake of the general brightness and cheerfulness. Edith, the stupid sister, put it down to the Christmas-time, and congratulated herself on her evergreens on the walls. Mr. Tom observed that the house was far better managed when Nan was at home: that meant that he found his slippers when he wanted them, and that there was always a taper on the chimney-piece in the billiard-room. Lady Beresford had all her little whims attended to; and as for Madge, that young lady was greatly delighted to have a safe and sure confidante. For she was much exercised at this time both with her fears

about Mr. Hanbury, who followed her about like a ghost, kept silent by the dread of Vice-Chancellors and tipstiffs, and her vain little hopes about Captain Frank King, whose intentions were scarcely a matter of doubt. Nan listened in her grave, sweet way that had earned for her, from Madge, the name of "Old Mother Nan;" and then would say some nice thing to her sister; and then would carry her away on some charitable enterprise.

For this was the Christmas time; and what with continual choral services, and evergreens, and unearthly music in the still cold nights, there was a sort of exaltation in the air; and Nan wished to be practical. In consequence, Lady Beresford was gravely oppressed.

"I do believe, Nan," she said, vexedly, one morning as she was writing out a cheque—"I do believe your only notion of Christianity is the giving away coals."

"And a very good notion too," said Tom, who would allow no one to say anything against Nan.

But then came that fateful letter from Frank King. It arrived on a January morning—on a clear and brilliant forenoon, just as Nan and her younger sister were going out for a walk, tempted by the sunlight and the colours of the

sea. Madge herself took it from the postman at the door; glanced at the address, hastily opened the envelope, and guessed at, rather than read, the contents.

"Oh, Nan," she said hurriedly, "wait a moment. There is something—something I want to speak to you about—come into the dining-room—oh, do you know what this is, Nan?—Captain King has written."

"Yes, dear," said Nan, calmly and kindly, as she followed her into the empty dining-room.

"I must not show you the letter, must I?" said the younger sister, eagerly, though she was herself still reading and re-reading it. "But you know what it is, Nan. And I must send an answer—oh dear, what shall I do?"

"You ought to know, Madge," her sister said. "You were not unprepared, surely. I thought you expected it. I thought you would have had your mind made up."

"But it is so dreadful—so sudden—so terrible! Look at my hands—I am all shaking. Oh, Nan, what would you do—what would you do if you were me?"

Nan seemed to be thinking of something far away; it was after a second that she recalled herself to this question, and then she answered with some astonishment—

“Don’t you know your own mind, Madge?”

“Well, I do in a way,” said the younger sister, still staring at the letter. “I like him well enough. I think it would do very well; and there would be no trouble with any one. I am sorry for that poor fellow Hanbury; but what is the use of his hanging about, and keeping one nervous? There is no use in it all—nothing but bother. And I know Captain King is very fond of me, and I think he would be very kind; and you know he is not going to sea again. And mamma would be pleased. Do you think I should go to her now?”

“What is the use of going to any one until you know what your mind is?”

If the unhappy Hanbury could only have seen his sweetheart at this moment—staring blankly at the open letter, with a doubt on her face which was most probably inspired by some vague and tender recollection of himself! What might not have happened if only he could have intervened at this crisis, and appealed to her with eyes and speech, and implored her to defy these terrible authorities in London? But Madge kept looking at the letter; and then she shut it together; and then she said with decision—

“I think it’s the best thing I can do. Wait a minute, Nan; I’ll go and tell mamma.”

When she came downstairs again she was quite radiant and eager in her joy.

“Oh, I’m so glad it’s all settled and over. I’m so glad there’ll be no more worry and bother. And really Captain King is one of the nicest-looking men we know—Edith has always said so—and he is so quiet and pleasant in his manner, and very amusing too : that is because he has no pretence. And grateful for small kindnesses ; I suppose being so long at sea, and not seeing so many people, he hasn’t got *blasé*. Then he never pretends to be bored—but why are you so solemn, Nan ; doesn’t it please you ?”

Nan kissed her sister.

“I hope you will be very happy, dear,” she said, in her grave, kind way.

“Then I suppose I must answer this letter at once,” continued Madge, in her excited way. “But how am I to do it, Nan ? See how my fingers are all shaking ; I couldn’t write. And it would take me a month to find out what to say—and here you are being kept in, when you are always wanting to be out in the open air——”

“Oh, don’t mind me, Madge. I will stay in with pleasure, if you want me.”

“But you shan’t stay in on my account, dear Mother Nan—not a bit of it—not for all the

men in the world. And yet I ought to send him a message. I ought to write."

"I think, Madge," the elder sister said, slowly, "if that is any trouble to you, you might send him a message he would understand, without your writing much—a flower, perhaps——"

"But what sort of flower?" said the younger sister, eagerly.

Nan's face flushed somewhat, and she seemed embarrassed and slow to answer.

"You—you should know yourself," she said, turning her eyes aside. "Any flower, perhaps—a bit of—of forget-me-not——"

"Of course that would do very well; but where could you get forget-me-nots just now?"

Nan again hesitated; she seemed to be forcing herself to speak.

"There's a little bit in a button-hole in ——'s window," she said, at last; "I saw it there yesterday at least."

"Dear Mother Nan," said Madge, enthusiastically, "you are as clever as twenty Vice-Chancellors! We will walk along at once, and see if it is still there. And in the meantime I will write a word on a sheet of paper—I can manage that any-way—and you might address an envelope——"

"Oh no, I couldn't do that," said Nan, inadvertently shrinking back.

"Very well, I will struggle through it," said Madge, blithely; and she went and got writing-materials, and scrawled the few words necessary. They went out into the beautiful clear cold morning, and walked along through the crowd of promenaders with their fresh-coloured faces and furs telling of the wintry weather. And in due course of time they arrived at the florist's window, and found the bit of forget-me-not still in the little nosegay. Madge made no secret of her intention. She opened up the nosegay on the counter of the shop; took out the piece of forget-me-not; put it in the folded sheet of paper; and then carefully—but with fingers no longer trembling—closed the envelope. When they had come out again, and gone and posted the letter, they found themselves at a stand-still.

"Now I know you would like a longer walk, Nan," said the younger sister, "and I am sure you won't mind if I go back at once. I do so want to write a long letter to Mary. And I haven't told Edith yet, you know."

To this also Nan consented; and so Madge departed. Nan, left to herself, looked for a moment or two, somewhat wistfully, at the far

breadths of the shining water ; and then turned and walked slowly and thoughtfully along one of the wider thoroughfares leading up from the sea. The world seemed too bright and eager and busy out here ; she wished to be alone, and in the dusk ; and in this thoroughfare there was a church, spacious and gloomy, that was kept open all the week round. Half unconsciously to herself she walked in that direction. So absorbed was she that, when she reached the entrance, she scarcely perceived that there were some persons standing about. From the clear light of the sun she passed into a long covered way that was almost dark ; there was a low sound of music issuing from the building ; it was a refuge she was seeking ; and she vaguely hoped that there would be few people within.

But just as she gained the entrance proper, and was about to enter the dark and dusky place before her, behold ! here was a great smiling throng coming along the aisle, headed by a bridegroom and a white-clothed bride. The music that was gaily pealing through the building was the " Wedding March " that no familiarity robs of its majestic swing and melody. Nan had suddenly a sort of guilty self-consciousness. She felt she had no business even to look on at bridal processions. She passed in by

another door—into that space of dark and empty pews; and very soon the bridal people were all gone from the place, and apparently no one was left but the white-surpliced performers at the organ in the choir.

That choir was a beautiful thing away beyond the dusk. The sunlight entering by the stained-glass windows filled it with a softly golden glory; so that the splendours of the altar, and the tall brass candlesticks, and the seven swinging lamps, and the organ itself, were all suffused with it, and seemed to belong to some other world far away. And then, after the “Wedding March” was over, there was a pause of silence, and a slight sound of feet in the echoing building behind; and then the music began again—something distant, and sad, and yearning, like the cry of a soul seeking for light in the dark, for comfort in despair. Nan, in her solitary pew, bowed her head and covered her face with her hands. This music was less picturesque, perhaps, than that she had heard in the cathedral at Lucerne, but it had more of a human cry in it; it was an appeal for guidance—for light—for light in the darkness of the world. The tears were running down Nan’s face. And then there came into a neighbouring pew a woman dressed in a peculiar costume, all in

black ; and she, too, knelt down and covered her face with her hands. And Nan would fain have gone to her and said—

“ Oh, sister, take me with you and teach me. You have chosen your path in the world—the path of charity and good-will and peace ; let me help you ; let me give myself to the poor and the sick. There must be something somewhere for me to do in the world. Take me into your sisterhood ; I am not afraid of hardship ; let me be of some little use to those who are wretched and weary in heart.”

By and by that lady in black rose, went into the open space fronting the altar, knelt one knee slightly and then left. Presently Nan followed her, her head bent down somewhat, and her heart not very light.

Just as she was leaving the interior of the church, someone stepped out of the vestry, followed her for a second, and then addressed her. She turned and recognised Mr. Jacomb. He had not been officiating ; he was in ordinary clerical costume ; and there was something in the primness of that costume that suited his appearance. For he was a singularly clean-looking man ; his face smooth shaven ; his complexion of the fairest white and pink ; his hair yellow almost to whiteness ; his eyes gray, clear,

and kindly. For the rest, he was about six-and thirty ; of stoutish build ; and he generally wore a pleasant and complacent smile, as if the world had treated him kindly, despite his experiences in that poor parish in the south-east of London, and as if, whatever might happen to him, anxiety was not likely to put a premature end to his existence.

“ Dear me,” said he, “ what a coincidence ! I saw your sister Madge about twenty minutes ago. She seemed very happy about something or other.”

“ Mr Jacomb,” said Nan, “ do you know the lady who left a minute ago ? ”

“ No,” said he, wondering a little at the earnestness—or rather the absentness—of her manner. “ I only caught a glimpse of her. She belongs to one of the visiting sisterhoods.”

Nan was silent for a second or two.

“ You came to the wedding, of course ? ” continued Mr. Jacomb cheerfully. “ A capital match, that, for young De la Poer. She will have £18,000 a year when her mother dies ; and she is pretty too. She puts a little side on, perhaps, when she’s talking to strangers ; but that’s nothing. His brother was at Oxford when I was there, I remember—an awfully fast fellow ; but they say all the sons of clergymen are ; the other swing of the pendulum, you know. There’s

a medium in all things ; and if one generation gives itself over too much to piety, the next goes as far the other way. I suppose it's human nature."

This air of agreeable levity—this odour of worldliness (which was in great measure assumed)—did not seem to accord well with Nan's present mood. She was disturbed—uncertain—yearning for something she knew not what—and the echoes of that strange cry in the music were still in her soul. Mr. Jacomb's airs of being a man of the world—of being a clergyman who scorned to attach any esoteric mystery to his cloth, or to expect to be treated with a particular reverence—might put him on easy terms of friendship with Nan's sisters ; but they only made Nan regretful, and sometimes even impatient. Did he imagine the assumption of flippancy made him appear younger than he really was ? In any case it was bad policy so far-as Nan was concerned. Nan was a born worshipper. She was bound to believe in something or somebody. And the story she had heard of the Rev. Charles Jacomb's assiduous, earnest, uncomplaining labour in that big parish had at the very outset won for him her great regard. He did not understand how he was destroying her childlike faith in him by his saturnine little jokes.

“Mr. Jacomb,” said Nan, timidly, “I should be so greatly obliged to you if you could find out something more for me about those sisterhoods. They must do a great deal of good. And their dress is such a protection; they can go anywhere without fear of rudeness or insult. I suppose it is not a difficult thing to get admission——”

He was staring at her in amazement.

“But not for you—not for you!” he cried. “Why, it is preposterous for you to think of such a thing. There are plenty who have nothing else in the world to look forward to. You have all your life before you yet. My dear Miss Anne, you must not indulge in day-dreams. Look at your sister Madge. Oh, by-the-way, she said something about your mamma having sent me a note this morning, asking me to dine with you on Friday evening; and then remembering, after the note was posted, that on that evening you had taken a box for the pantomime. Well, there needs be no trouble about that, if I may join your party to go there also.”

Nan said nothing; but perhaps there was the slightest trace of surprise, or interrogation, in her look. Immediately he said—

“Oh, I very much approve of pantomimes, from a professional point of view—I do, really. You see, the imagination of most people is very

dull—it wants a stimulus—and I am perfectly certain, if the truth were known, that the great majority of people in this country have derived their pictorial notions of heaven from the transformation-scenes in pantomimes. I am certain of it. John Martin's pictures—the only other alternative—are not striking enough. So, on the whole, I very much approve of pantomimes ; and I shall be very glad to go with you on Friday, if I may."

Nan made some excuse, shook hands with him, and went. She walked home hurriedly, she knew not why ; it almost seemed as though she wanted to leave something well behind her. And she was very kind to her sisters for the remainder of that day ; but somewhat grave.

Meanwhile, Madge's letter to her married sister in London had been sent. And the first answer to it was contained in a postscript to a letter addressed by Mary Beresford to her mother. This was the postscript :—

"What is this nonsense Madge writes to me about herself and Holford King? Has Captain King got it into his head that he would like to marry his deceased wife's sister?"

Lady Beresford threw the letter aside with a sigh, wishing people would not write in conundrums.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ACCEPTED SUITOR.

“OH, Nan, here is the cab. What shall I say to him? What am I to say to him?”

“I think you ought to know yourself, dear,” said Nan, gently, and then she slipped away from the room, leaving Madge alone and standing at the window.

But after all it was not so serious a matter. Some one came into the room, and Madge turned.

“May I call you Madge?” said he, holding both her hands.

She answered, with her eyes cast down—

“I suppose I must call you Frank.”

That was all, for at the same moment Mr. Tom was heard calling to his mother and sisters that Captain King had arrived; and directly after, Lady Beresford and Edith entered the room, followed by Mr. Tom, who was declaring that they must have dinner put forward to six o'clock, if they were all to go to the pantomime.

There was a little embarrassment—not much. Frank King kept looking towards the door. He wondered why Nan had not come with the others. He was curious to see how much she had changed. Perhaps he should not even recognise her? Without scarcely knowing why, he was hoping she might not be quite like the Nan of former days.

Mr. Tom consulted his watch again.

“Shall I ring and tell them to hurry on dinner, mother?”

“We cannot alter the dinner-hour now,” Lady Beresford said, plaintively. “It has already been altered once. Both Mr. Roberts and Mr. Jacomb promised to come at half-past six, so that you might all go to the pantomime together in good time.”

“What?” cried Mr. Tom. “Jacomb? Did you say Jacomb, mother?”

“I said Mr. Roberts and Mr. Jacomb,” said his mother.

“And what the etcetera is he doing in that gallery!” exclaimed Mr. Tom. “Well, I guess we shall have a high old time of it at dinner. Soda-water and incense. But there’s one thing they always agree about. Get them on to portwine vintages, and they run together like a brace of greyhounds.”

Here Captain King begged to be excused, as there was but little time for him to go along to his hotel and get dressed for this early dinner. When—being accompanied to the door by Mr. Tom himself—he had left, Madge said—

“How do you like him, mamma? Are you pleased with him?”

“He has not spoken to me yet, you know,” said the mother, wearily; she had had to go through several such scenes, and they worried her.

“Oh, but it’s all arranged,” Madge said, cheerfully. “He won’t bother you about a solemn interview. It’s all arranged. How did you think he looked, Edith? I do hope he won’t lose that brown colour by not going back to sea; it suits him; I don’t like pastey-faced men. Now, Mr. Jacomb isn’t pastey-faced, although he is a clergyman. By-the-way, what has become of Nan?”

Nan had been quite forgotten. Perhaps she was dressing early, or looking after the dinner-table; at all events, it was time for the other sisters to go and get ready also.

Punctual to the moment, Captain King arrived at the door, and entered, and went upstairs. He was not a little excited. Now he would see Nan—and not only her, but also this clergyman, whom he was also curious to see. At such a

moment—arriving as Madge's accepted suitor—it was not Nan that he ought to have been thinking about. But it was Nan whom his first quick glance round the drawing-room sought out ; and instantly he knew she was not there.

Everybody else was, however. Mr. Roberts, with his conspicuous red opal and diamonds, was standing on the hearth-rug with his back to the fire, talking to Lady Beresford, who was cushioned up in an easy-chair. Mr. Jacomb was entertaining the two sisters, Edith and Madge, who were laughing considerably. Mr. Tom was walking about with his hands in his pockets, ferocious, for dinner was already eighteen seconds late.

Frank King had not much time to study the looks or manners of this clergyman, to whom he was briefly introduced ; for already his attention, which was at the moment exceedingly acute, was drawn to the opening of the door. It was Nan who slipped in, quietly. Apparently she had seen the others before ; for when she caught sight of him, she at once advanced towards him, with a grave, quiet smile on her face, and an outstretched hand.

“ Oh, how do you do, Captain King ? ” she said, in the most friendly way, and without the least trace of embarrassment.

Of course she looked at his eyes as she said so. Perhaps she did not notice the strange, startled look that had dwelt there for an instant as he regarded her—a look as if he had seen some one whom he had not expected to see—some one whom he almost feared to see. He could not speak, indeed. For the moment he had really lost command of himself, and seemed bewildered. Then he stammered—

“How do you do, Miss Anne? I am glad to see you looking so well. You—you have not altered much—anything—during these last three or four years.”

“Oh, Nan has altered a great deal I can tell you,” said Mr. Tom; “and for the better. She isn’t half as saucy as she used to be.”

But Nan had turned to her mother, to say privately—

“They are quite ready, mamma. The shades just came in time; and the candles are all lit now.”

Then she turned to Captain King again. If she was acting non-embarrassment, she was acting very well. The clear, friendly, gray-blue eyes regarded him with frankness; there was no touch of tell-tale colour in the fair, piquant, freckled face; she smiled, as if to one in whom she had perfect confidence.

“It is so kind of you,” she said, “to have let my brother pay you a visit to Kingscourt; I am afraid he must be dull here sometimes. And he says he enjoyed it immensely, and that every one was so kind to him. I hope he didn’t disgrace himself—I mean in the shooting; you see he has not had a great deal of practice.”

“Oh, he shot very well,” said Captain Frank King, somewhat hurriedly. “Oh yes, very well. I should call him a very good shot. I am glad he liked his visit.” But Frank King was not looking into Nan’s eyes as he spoke.

Then some one at the door said, “Dinner is served, your ladyship;” and the company arranged themselves according to order, and went downstairs. It fell to Captain King’s lot to go down last, with Lady Beresford; but when they reached the dining-table he found that his neighbour was to be Madge, and he was glad of that.

Nan was opposite to him; he had discovered that at the first glance, and thereafter he rather avoided looking that way. He endeavoured to entertain Lady Beresford, and occasionally spoke a little to Madge; but he was somewhat pre-occupied on the whole; and very frequently he might have been caught regarding the clergyman-guest with an earnest scrutiny. Mr. Jacomb, to do him justice, was making himself

the friend of everybody. He could talk well and pleasantly ; he had a number of little jokes and stories ; and he was making himself generally agreeable. The efflorescent Roberts was anxious to know—as anxious, that is, as a very devoted regard for his *menu* would permit—the precise position held by a certain High Churchman who was being harried and worried by the law courts at this time ; but Mr. Jacomb, with great prudence, would have nothing to say on such subjects. He laughed the whole matter off. He preferred to tell anecdotes about his Oxford days ; and gave you to understand that these were not far removed from the present time. You might have guessed that he and his companions were the least little bit wild. The names of highly respectable dignitaries in the Church were associated with stories of scrapes that were quite alarming, and with sayings that just bordered here and there on the irreverent. But then, to a clergyman much is permitted ; for it is his business to know where the line should be drawn ; other people might not feel quite so safe.

All this time Captain Frank King was intently regarding Mr. Jacomb ; and Nan saw it. The smile died away from her face. She grew self-absorbed ; she scarcely lifted her eyes.

"Nan, what's the matter with you?" said her brother Tom to her, privately. "You're not going to cry, are you?"

She looked up with her frank, clear eyes, and said—

"I was trying to remember some lines near the beginning of *Faust*. They are about a clergyman and a comedian."

This was beyond Mr. Tom; so he said nothing. But what Nan had meant had been uttered in a moment of bitterness, and was entirely unjust. Mr. Jacomb was not failing in any proper respect for his sacred calling. But he was among some young people; he hoped they would not think his costume coercive; he wished to let them know that his youth also had only been the other day, as it were, and that he appreciated a joke as well as any one. If his speech at the moment was frivolous—and, indeed, intentionally frivolous—his life had not been frivolous. He had never intrigued or cajoled for preferment, but had done the work that lay nearest him. At Oxford he had toadied no one. And his "record," as the Americans say, in that parish in the south-east of London, was unblemished and even noble.

But he made a hash of it that evening, somehow. Nan Beresford grew more and more

depressed and disheartened—almost ashamed. If Frank King had not been there, perhaps she would have cared less ; but she knew—without daring to look—that Frank King was regarding and listening with an earnest and cruel scrutiny.

When the time came for their starting for the theatre, Nan disappeared. Tom began to make a noise, and then the message came that, Please sir, Miss Anne had a headache, and might she be excused ? Tom made a further noise, and declared that the whole thing must be put off. Go to see a pantomime without Nan he would not. Then a further message came from Miss Anne, saying that she would be greatly distressed if they did not go ; and so, after no end of growling and grumbling, Mr. Tom put his party into two cabs and took them off. Nan heard the roll of the wheels lessen and cease.

It was about half-past eleven that night that someone noisily entered Nan's room, and lit the gas. Nan opening her eyes—for she was in bed and asleep—beheld a figure there, all white with snow.

“ Oh, Nan,” said this new-comer, in great excitement, “ I must tell you all about it. There has been such fun. Never such a gale known on the south coast——”

“ Child ! ” said the now thoroughly awakened

sister, "go at once and take off your things. You will be wet through!"

"Oh, this is nothing," said Madge, whose pink cheeks showed what she had faced. "I left a whole avalanche in the hall. The streets are a foot deep already. Not a cab to be got. We had to fight our way from the theatre arm in arm; the wind and snow were like to lift us off our feet altogether. Frank said it reminded him of Canada. All the gentlemen are below; Tom would have them come in to get them some mulled claret."

Madge's ejaculatory sentences came to an end simply for want of breath. She was all panting.

"Such a laughing there was! Frank and I ran full tilt against a gentleman who was coming full sail before the wind. 'Hard-a-port!' Frank cried. There was an awful smash. My hat blew off; and we hid in a doorway till Frank got it back again."

At Nan's earnest entreaties, her younger sister at last consented to take off her outer garments and robe herself in some of Nan's—meantime shaking a good deal of snow on to the carpet. Then she came and sat down.

"I must tell you all about it, dear Nan," she said, "for I am so happy; and it has been such

a delightful evening. You can't imagine what a splendid companion Frank is—taking everything free and easy, and always in such a good humour. Well, we went to the theatre; and of course Edith wanted to show herself off, so I had the corner of the box with the curtains, and Frank sat next me, of course—it was 'Cinderella'—beautiful!—I never saw such brilliant costumes; and even Edith was delighted with the way they sang the music. Mind, we didn't know that by this time the storm had begun. It was all like fairy-land. But am I tiring you, Nan?" said Madge with a sudden compunction. "Would you rather go to sleep again?"

"Oh no, dear."

"Is your headache any better?"

"A great deal."

"Shall I get you some eau-de-cologne?"

"Oh no."

"Does it sound strange to you that I should call him Frank? It did to me at first. But of course it had to be done; so I had to get over it."

"You don't seem to have had much difficulty," said Nan, with an odd kind of smile.

"Well," Madge confessed, "he isn't like other men. There's no pretence about him. He makes friends with you at once. And you can't be

very formal with any one who is lugging you through the snow."

"No, of course not," said Nan gravely. "I was not saying there could be anything wrong in calling him Frank."

"Well, the pantomime; did I tell you how good it was? Mr. Roberts says he never saw such beautifully-designed dresses in London; and the music was lovely—oh! if you had heard Cinderella, how she sang, you would have fallen in love with her, Nan. We all did. Then we had ices. There's a song which Cinderella sings Frank promised to get for me; but I can't sing. All I'm good for is to show off Edith."

"You ought to practise more, dear."

"But it's no good once you are married. You always drop it. If I have any time I'll take to painting. You see you have no idea, in a house like this, the amount of trouble there is in keeping up a place like Kingscourt."

"But you know, Madge, Mrs. Holford King is there."

"She can't be there always; she's very well up in years," said the practical Madge. "And you know the whole estate is now definitely settled on Frank—though there are some heavy mortgages. We shan't be able to entertain

much for the first few years; I dare say—but we shall always be glad to have you, Nan.”

Nan did not say anything; she turned her face away a little bit.

“Nan,” said her sister, presently, “didn’t Mary and Edith have a notion that Captain King was at one time rather fond of you?”

Nan’s face flushed hastily.

“They—they—imagined something of that kind, I believe.”

“But was it true?”

Nan raised herself up, and took her sister’s hand in her two hands.

“You see, dear,” she said, gently, and with her eyes cast down, “young men—I mean very young men—have often passing fancies that don’t mean very much. Later on they make their serious choice.”

“But,” said Madge, persistently, “but I suppose he never really asked you to be his wife?”

“His wife!” said Nan, with well-simulated surprise. “Recollect, Madge, I was just over seventeen. You don’t promise to be anybody’s wife at an age like that; you are only a child then.”

“I am only eighteen,” said Madge.

“But there is a great difference. And recol-

lect that Captain King is now older, and knows better what his wishes are, and what way his happiness lies. You ought to be very proud, Madge ; and you should try to make him proud of you also."

"Oh, I will, Nan ; I will really. I wish you would teach me a lot of things."

"What things ?"

"Oh, you know. All the sort of stuff that you know. Tidal waves and things."

"But Captain King won't have anything more to do with tidal waves."

"Then we'll go round the shops to-morrow, Nan ; and you'll tell me about Chippendale furniture and blue china."

"Don't you think there will be enough of that at Kingscourt ; and just such things as you couldn't get to buy in any shops ?"

"Then what am I to do, Nan ?"

"You can try to be a good wife, dear ; and that's better than anything."

Madge rose.

"I'll let you off, Nan. But I do feel terribly selfish. I haven't said a single word about you——"

"Oh, but I don't want anything said about me," said Nan, almost in alarm.

"Well, you know, Nan, everybody says this :

that a clergyman's wife has more opportunities of doing good than any other women ; for, you see, they are in the middle of it all, and they can interfere as no one else can, and it is expected of them, and the poor people don't object to them as they might to others."

" Oh, I think that is quite true," said Nan, thoughtfully—perhaps with a slight sigh. " Yes, I have often thought of that."

" And you know, dear, that was what Providence meant you to be," said Madge, with a friendly smile. " That is just what you were made for—to be kind to other people. Good-night, old Mother Nan ! "

" Good-night, dear."

They kissed each other ; and Madge turned off the gas and left. Presently, however, Madge returned, opened the door, and came in on tiptoe.

" Nan, you are not asleep yet ? "

" Of course not."

" I wanted to ask you, Nan ; do you think he would like me to work a pair of slippers for him ? "

" No doubt he would," was the quiet answer.

" For I was thinking it would be so nice if you would come with me to-morrow and help me to choose the materials ; and then, you see, Nan,

you might sketch me some design, out of your own head, for you are so clever at those things, and that would be better than a shop pattern. And then," added Madge, "I should tell him it was your design."

Nan paused for a second.

"I will do whatever you want, Madge—but you must not say that I made the design for you. It won't be worth much at the best. I would rather have nothing said about it, dear."

'Very well, Nan ; that's just like you.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WHITE WORLD.

NEXT morning it still snowed and blew hard ; no one could go out ; it was clearly a day to be devoted to indoor amusements. And then Frank King, despite the state of the streets and the absence of cabs, made his way along, and was eagerly welcomed. As Mr. Tom's companion he was to spend the whole day there. Billiards, music, lunch, painting—they would pass the time somehow. And meanwhile the gusts of wind rattled the windows ; and the whirling snow blurred out the sea ; and Mr. Tom kept on big fires.

Nan remained in her own room. When Madge went up to bring her down she found her reading Thomas a Kempis.

"Frank has asked twice where you were," Madge remonstrated.

"But that is not a command," said Nan, with a smile. "I should have thought, judging by

the sound, that you were being very well amused below."

Madge went away, and in about an hour after came back. She found that her sister had put away *De Imitatione Christi*, and was at her desk.

"Writing! To whom?"

"To the Editor of the *Times*," said Nan, laughing at her sister's instantaneous dismay.

"The *Times*? Are you going to turn a blue-stocking, Nan?"

"Oh no; it's only about blankets. You can read the letter; do you think he will print it?"

This was the letter which Madge read, and which was written in a sort of handwriting that some editors would be glad to see oftener:—

"Dear Sir,—The Government interfere to punish a milkman who adulterates milk with water; and I wish to put the question in your columns why they should not also punish the manufacturers who dress blankets with arsenic? Surely it is a matter of equal importance. Poor people can get along without milk, unless there are very small children in the house; but when they have insufficient food, and insufficient fire, and scant clothes, and perhaps also a leaky roof, a good warm pair of blankets is almost a

necessity. You cannot imagine what a compensation it is, especially in weather like the present ; but how are the charitably disposed to take such a gift to a poor household when it may become the instrument of death or serious illness ? Dear Sir, I hope you will call upon the Government to put down this wicked practice ; and I am, yours respectfully,

“AN ENGLISH GIRL.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Madge, who had feared that her sister had taken to literature ; “that’s quite the right thing for you. Of course, a clergyman’s wife must know all about blankets, and soup-kitchens, and things.”

Nan flushed a little, and said quickly, and with an embarrassed smile—

“I thought of putting in something about his ‘eloquent pen’ or his ‘generous advocacy,’ but I suppose he gets a great deal of that kind of flattery, and isn’t to be taken in. I think I will leave it as it is. It is really most shameful that such things should be allowed.”

“When are you coming down to see Frank ?”

“By and by, dear. I, am going now to get mamma her egg and port wine.”

“I know Frank wants to see you.”

“Oh, indeed,” she said, quietly, as she folded up the letter.

That memorable snowstorm raged all day; the shops fronting the sea were shut; the whole place looked like some vast, deserted, white City of the Dead. But towards evening the squalls moderated; that fine, penetrating, crystalline snow ceased to come in whirls and gusts; and people began to get about, the black figures making their way over or through the heavy drifts, or striking for such places as the force of the wind had driven bare. Here and there shovels were in requisition to open a pathway; it was clearly thought that the gale was over; the Beresfords and their guest began to speak of an excursion next day to Stanmer Park, lest peradventure it might be possible to have a lane or two swept on the ice for a little skating.

The next morning proved to be brilliantly beautiful; and they were all up and away betimes on their somewhat hopeless quest. All, that is to say, except Nan: for she had sundry pensioners to look after, who were likely to have fared ill during the inclement weather. Nan put on her thickest boots and her ulster, and went out into the world of snow. The skies were blue and clear; the air was fresh and keen; it was a relief to be out after that monotonous confinement in the house.

Nan went her rounds, and wished she was a

millionaire, for the fine snow had penetrated everywhere, and there was great distress. Perhaps she was really trying to imagine herself a clergyman's wife; at all events, when she had grown tired, and perhaps a little heart-sick, it was no wonder that she should think of going into that church, which was always open, for a little rest, and solace, and soothing quiet.

This was what she honestly meant to do—and, moreover, it was with no expectation of meeting Mr. Jacomb there, for it was almost certain that he also would be off on a round of visitations. She had a craving for quiet; perhaps some slow, grateful music would be filling the air; there would be silence in the vast hushed place.

Well, it was by the merest accident that her eyes happened to light on a vessel that was scudding up channel under double-reefed topsails, and she stood for a minute to watch it. Then she, also inadvertently, perceived that the coast-guard'sman over the way had come out of his little box, and was similarly watching the vessel—through his telescope. Nan hesitated for a second. The snow was deep, though a kind of path had been trodden a few yards farther along. Then she walked quickly on till she came to that path, crossed, went back to the coastguard'sman,

and addressed him, with a roseate glow on her cheek.

"Oh, I beg your pardon—but—but—I suppose you know Singing Sal?"

"Yes, Miss," said the little Celtic-looking man with the brown beard. He was evidently surprised.

"Do you know where she is? I hope she wasn't in the storm yesterday? She hasn't been along this way lately?"

"No, Miss; not that I knows of."

"Thank you, I am very much obliged."

"Wait a minute, Miss—Wednesday—yes, it was last night, I believe, as Sal was to sing at a concert at Updene. Yes, it was. Some o' my mates at Cuckmere got leave to go."

"Updene farm?"

"Yes, Miss," said the wiry little sailor with a grin. "That's promotion for Sal—to sing at a concert."

"I don't see why she should not sing at a concert," said Nan, regarding him with her clear gray eyes, so that the grin instantly vanished from his face, "I've heard much worse sing at many a concert. Then, if she was at Updene last night, she would most likely come along here to-day."

"I don't know, Miss," said the man, who

knew much less about Singing Sal's ways than did Miss Anne Beresford. "Mayhap the concert didn't come off, along of the snow."

Nan again thanked him, and continued on her way—eastward. She was thinking. Somehow she had quite forgotten about the church. The air around her was wonderfully keen and exhilarating; the skies overhead were intensely blue; out there on the downs the soft, white snow would be beautiful. Nan walked on at a brisker pace, and her spirits rose. The sunlight seemed to get into her veins. And then her footing required a great deal of attention, and she had plenty of active exercise; for though here and there the force of the wind had left the roads almost bare, elsewhere the snow had formed long drifts of three to five feet in depth, and these had either to be got round or plunged through. Then, up Kemp-Town way, where there is less traffic, her difficulties increased. The keen air seemed to make her easily breathless. But at all events she felt comfortably warm, and the sun felt hot on her cheek.

She had at length persuaded herself that she was anxious about Singing Sal's safety. Many people must have perished in that snowstorm—caught unawares on the lonely downs. At all events, she could ask at one or two of the

coastguard stations if anything had been heard of Sal. It was just possible she might meet her, if the entertainment at Updene farm had come off.

At Black Rock station they had heard nothing; but she went on all the same. For now this was a wonderful and beautiful landscape all around her, up on these high cliffs; and the novelty of it delighted her, though the bewildering white somewhat dazzled her eyes. Towards the edge of the cliffs, where the wind had swept across, there was generally not more than an inch or two of snow—hard and crisp, with traceries of birds' feet on it, like long strings of lace; but a few yards on her left the snow had got banked up in the most peculiar drifts, resembling in a curious manner the higher ranges of the Alps. Sometimes, however, the snow became deep here also; so that she had to betake herself to the road, where the farmers' men around had already cut a way through the deeper stoppages; and there she found herself going along a white gallery—yellow-white on the left, where the sunlight fell on the snow, but an intense blue on the right, where the crystalline snow, in shadow, reflected the blue of the sky overhead. And still she ploughed on her way, with all her pulses tingling with life and gladness; for this wonder of yellow whiteness and

blue whiteness, and the sunlight, and the keen air, all lent themselves to a kind of fascination; and she scarcely perceived that her usual landmarks were gone: it was enough for her to keep walking, stumbling, sinking, avoiding the deeper drifts, and farther and farther losing herself in the solitariness of this white, hushed world.

Then, far away, and showing very black against the white, she perceived the figure of a woman, and instantly jumped to the conclusion that that must be Singing Sal. But what was Sal—if it were she—about? That dark figure was wildly swaying one arm like an orator declaiming to an excited assemblage. Had the dramatic stimulus of the previous night's entertainment—Nan asked herself—got into the woman's brain? Was she reciting poetry to that extravagant gesturing? Nan walked more slowly now, and took breath; while the woman, whoever she was, evidently was coming along at a swinging pace.

No; that was no dramatic gesture. It was too monotonous. It looked more as if she were sowing—to imperceptible furrows. Nan's eyes were very long-sighted, but this thing puzzled her altogether. She now certainly looked like a farmer's man scattering seed-corn.

Singing Sal saw and recognised her young-lady friend at some distance, and seemed to moderate her gestures, though these did not quite cease. When she came up, Nan said to her :

“What are you doing?”

“Well, Miss,” she said, with a bright smile—her face was quite red with the cold air, and her hair not so smooth as she generally kept it—“my arm does ache, to tell the truth. And my barley’s nearly done. I have tried to scatter it wide, so as the finches and larks may have a chance, even when the jackdaws and rooks are at it.”

“Are you scattering food for the birds, then?”

“They’re starved out in this weather, Miss; and then the boys come out wi’ their guns; and the dicky-laggers are after them too——”

“The what?”

“The bird-catchers, Miss. If I was a farmer now, I’d take a horsewhip, I would, and I’d send those gentry double quick back to Whitechapel. And the gentlefolks, Miss, it isn’t right of them to encourage the trapping of larks when there’s plenty of other food to be got. Well, my three-penn’orth o’ barley that I bought in Newhaven is near done now.”

She looked into the little wallet that she had twisted round in front of her.

“ Oh, if you don’t mind,” said Nan, eagerly, “ I will give you a shilling—or two or three shillings—to get some more.”

“ You could do better than that, Miss,” said Sal. “ Maybe you know some one that lives in Lewes Crescent ? ”

“ Yes, I do.”

“ Well, ye see, Miss, there’s such a lot o’ birds as won’t eat grain at all ; and if you was to get the key of the garden in Lewes Crescent, and get a man to sweep the snow off a bit of the grass, and your friends might throw down some mutton bones and scraps from the kitchen, and the birds from far and near would find it out—being easily seen, as it might be. Half the thrushes and blackbirds along this countryside ’ll be dead before this snow gives out.”

“ Oh, I will go back at once and do that,” said Nan, readily.

“ Look how they’ve been running about all the morning,” said this fresh-coloured, dark-eyed woman, regarding the traceries on the snow at her feet. “ Most of them larks—you can see the spur. And that’s a rook with his big heavy claws. And there’s a hare, Miss—I should say he was trotting as light as could be—and there’s nothing uglier than a trotting hare—he’s like a race-horse walking—all stiff and jolting, because

of the high aunches—haunches, Miss. They're all bewildered-like, birds and beasts the same. I saw the pad of a fox close by Rottingdean; he must have come a long way to try for a poultry-yard. And, what's rarer, I saw a covey of partridges, Miss, settle down on the sea as I was coming along by Saltdean Gap. They was tired out, poor things, and not driven before the wind either, but fighting against it, and going out to sea blind-like; and then I saw them sink down on to the water, and then the waves knocked them about anyway. I hear there was a wonderful sight of brent geese up by Berling Gap yesterday—but I'm keeping you standing in the cold, Miss——"

"I will walk back with you," said Nan, turning.

"No, Miss. No, thank you, Miss," said Sal, sturdily.

"But only as far as Lewes Crescent," said Nan, with a gentle laugh. "You know I am going to stop there for the mutton bones. I want to know what has happened to you since the last time I saw you—that's a good while ago now."

"Two things, Miss, has happened that I'm proud of," said Sal, as the two set out to face the brisk westerly wind. "I was taking a turn through Surrey, and when I was at ——, they

told me that a great poet lived close by there—
Mr. ——”

“Of course every one knows Mr. ——,” said Nan.

“I didn’t,” said Sal, rather shamefacedly. “You see, Miss, the two I showed you are enough company for me; and I haven’t got money to buy books wi’. Well, I was passing near the old gentleman’s house, and he came out, and he spoke to me as we went along the road. He said he had seen me reading the afternoon before, on the common; and he began to speak about poetry; and then he asked me if I had read any of Mr. ——’s, without saying he was himself. I was sorry to say no, Miss, for he was such a kind old gentleman; but he said he would send me them; and most like they’re waiting for me now at Goring, where I gave him an address. Lor, the questions he asked me!—about Shakespeare and Burns—you know, Miss, I had them in my bag; and then about myself. I shouldn’t wonder if he wrote a poem about me.”

“Well, that’s modest,” said Nan, with another quiet laugh.

Sal did not at all like that gentle reproof.

“It isn’t my pride, Miss; it’s what he said to me that I go by,” she retorted. “I didn’t ask him”

"If he does, all England will hear about you then," said Nan. "And now, what was the other thing?"

Sal again grew shamefaced a little. She opened the inner side of her wallet, took out a soiled, weather-beaten copy of the *Globe* Shakespeare, and from it extracted a letter.

"Perhaps you would like to read it yourself, Miss," she suggested.

Nan took it, and had little difficulty in deciphering its contents, though the language was occasionally a trifle hyperbolic. It contained nothing less than an offer of marriage addressed to Sal by a sailor in one of Her Majesty's ironclads, who said that he was tired of the sea, and that, if Sal would give up her wandering life, so would he, and he would retire into the coastguard. He pointed out the sacrifices he was ready to make for her; for it appeared that he was a petty officer. No matter; he was willing to become simple A.B. again; for he had his "feelin's;" and if so be as she would become his wife, then they would have a good weather-proof cottage, a bit of garden, and three-and-fourpence a day. It was a most business-like, sensible offer.

"And I'm sure I could do something for him," Nan eagerly said. "I think I could get him promotion. The Senior Naval Lord of the Ad-

miralty is a friend of mine. And wouldn't it be better for you ? ”

“ No, Miss,” said Sal, with an odd kind of smile. “ I was glad to get the letter, for it shows I'm respected. But I'm not going to be caged yet. I never saw or heard of the man I would marry—except it might have been Robbie Burns, if he was still alive. Sometimes when I've been reading a bit, coming along the downs all by myself like, I've seen somebody in the distance ; and I've said to myself, ‘ Well, now, if that was only to turn out to be that black-avised Ayrshire ploughman, it would be all over with me ; it would be “ Whistle and I'll come to ye, my lad.” ’ And then some shambling fellow of a labourer has come along, straw-haired, bent-backed, twisted-kneed, and scarcely enough spirit in him to say, ‘ Marnin t' ye,—good marnin t' ye, wench ! ’ ”

“ You are very independent,” said the sage Nan. “ And that's all very well, as long as your health lasts. But you might become ill. You would want relatives and friends, and a home. And in the coast-guard houses you would have a very comfortable home, and a garden to look after ; and your husband might get promotion.”

“ If ever I marry,” said Sal, shaking her head,

"it won't be one of the man-of-war's men. They've just as little spirit or independence as the day labourers. They've had it all crushed out of them by the hard usage of the officers."

"Oh, how can you say so!" said Nan, warmly. "The officers are English gentlemen. In former days there may have been cruelty, but I am certain that exists no longer. I know several officers: kinder-hearted men don't exist. Why, there is a captain in the navy——"

She stopped in great embarrassment. But Singing Sal, not heeding, said, laconically—

"It ain't the captain, Miss. He's too great a gentleman to interfere. It's the first lieutenant, who can make the ship a hell upon earth if he has a mind to. Ah! Miss, it's little you know of the discipline that goes on on board a man-o'-war. There's no human being could stand it who wasn't brought up to it. The merchantmen can't stand it, and won't stand it; that's where the officers find a difficulty when the Reserves are called out. You wouldn't find a man-o'-war's man marching up to the First Lord of the Admiralty with a lump of salt beef in his hand and asking him if it was fit to eat. And this Lord, Miss, being a civilian like, he never thought of having the man clapped in irons: 'Throw it overboard,' says he. 'I will see that

no more o' that kind of stuff is issued to Her Majesty's fleet.' That was the story I heard, Miss : the men were laughing about it at Beachy Head. And then, in the merchantmen Jack has a better chance, if he is a smart fellow——"

And so forth. They had once more got on to the subject of sailors and officers, regarded from their different points of view ; and it was not until they had reached Brighton that the sight of Lewes Crescent reminded Nan that she had now to part from her companion and go in search of mutton bones for the thrushes and blackbirds.

CHAPTER XIX.

BREAKING DOWN.

Not only was she successful in this work of charity, but she must needs also institute a similar system of outdoor relief at her own end of the town ; so that it was nearly dusk when she re-entered the house in Brunswick Terrace. She did not think of asking if there were any visitors ; she went upstairs ; perceived that the drawing-room door was an inch or two open, and was just about to enter when she heard voices. Inadvertently she paused.

It was Mr. Jacomb's voice. Then her mother said—

“ I married happily myself, and I have never tried to influence my daughters——”

Nan shrank back, like a guilty thing. She had only listened to discover whether it was some one she knew who had called ; but these few words of her mother's made her heart jump. She stole away noiselessly to her own room.

She sat down, anxious and agitated, fearing she scarcely knew what.

She was not long left in suspense. Her mother came into the room and shut the door.

"I thought I heard you come in, Nan," she said ; "and it's lucky you have, for Mr. Jacomb is here."

"But I don't want to see Mr. Jacomb, mamma," she said, breathlessly.

"He wants to see you," her mother said, quietly ; "and I suppose you know what it is about."

"I—I suppose so—yes, I can guess——. Oh, mother, dear !" cried Nan, going and clinging to her mother. "Do me this great kindness ! I can't see him. I don't want to see him. Mother, you will go and speak to him for me !"

"Well, that is extraordinary," said Lady Beresford, who, however, had far too great a respect for her nerves to become excited over this matter or anything else. "That's a strange request. I have just told him I would not interfere. Of course I don't consider it a good match ; you might do a great deal better from a worldly point of view. But you have always been peculiar, Nan. If you think it would be for your happiness to become a poor clergyman's wife, I will not oppose it. At the same

time, I have always thought you might do better——”

“Oh, mother, don’t you understand?” Nan broke in. “It’s to ask him to go away! I’m so sorry. If he had spoken before, I would have told him before——”

“You mean you refuse him, and I am to take the message,” said her mother, staring at her. “That is all?”

The girl was silent.

“I must say, Nan, you have been acting very strangely. You have led us all to believe that you were going to marry him. Why did you let the man come about the house?”

“Don’t speak like that to me, mother,” said Nan, with her under lip beginning to quiver. “I—I tried to think of it. I knew he wanted me to be his wife; I thought it might be right; I thought I could do something that way; and—and I tried to persuade myself. But I can’t marry him, mother—I can’t—I don’t wish to marry any one—I never will marry——”

“Don’t talk nonsense, child!” said her mother, severely, for there was a sort of tendency towards excitement in the atmosphere. “Let me understand clearly. I suppose you know your own mind. I am to go and tell this man definitely that you won’t marry him?”

“Mother, don’t put it in that harsh way. Tell him I am very sorry. Tell him I tried hard to think of it. Tell him I am sorry he has waited so long ; but if he had asked sooner——”

“He would have had the same answer ? ”

The girl’s face flushed red, and she said in a strange sort of way—

“Yes—perhaps so—I think it must have been the same answer at any time. Oh, I never, never could have brought myself to marry him ! Mother, does it look cruel—does it look as if I had treated him badly ? ” she added, in the same anxious way.

“No, I would not say that,” answered her mother, calmly. “A man must take his chance ; and until he speaks he can’t have an answer. I do not think Mr. Jacomb has any reason to complain—except, perhaps, that you don’t go yourself and hear what he has to say——”

“Oh, mother, I couldn’t do that. It would only be pain for both of us. And then I don’t refuse him, you see, mother ; that’s something——”

Lady Beresford was uncertain. The truth was, she was not at all sorry to be the bearer of this message—even at the cost of a little trouble—for she did think that her daughter ought to marry into a better position in life. But she

had just been listening to what Mr. Jacomb had to say for himself; and he had said a good deal, not only about himself, but about Nan, and her disposition, and what would best secure her happiness, and so forth. Lady Beresford had been just a little bit impressed, and the question was whether Nan ought not to be invited to a fair consideration of the matter as represented by Mr. Jacomb himself.

“Well, Nan, if your mind is quite clear about it——”

“Oh, it is, mother,” she answered eagerly, “quite—quite——”

That was an end. Her mother left the room, slowly; Nan listened for her footsteps until she heard her go into the drawing-room and close the door. Her first thought was to lock herself in, so that there should be no appeal. Her next was that it was excessively mean and cruel of her to experience this wonderful sense of relief, now that the die was irrevocably cast.

“If there was anything I could do for him,” she was thinking—“anything—anything but that;” and then she listened again to the stillness until she heard a bell ring, and the drawing-room door open again, and some one descend the stairs into the hall. She felt guilty and sorry at the same time. She wished she

could do something by way of compensation. He would not think it was mere heartlessness? For indeed she had tried. And would she not have done him a far greater wrong if she had married him without being able to give him her whole heart?

Nan went to the window; but it was too dark for her to see anything. She took it for granted he had gone away. She was glad, and ashamed of herself for being glad. She reproved herself. And then she had a vague sort of feeling that she would wear sackcloth and ashes—or try to be ten times kinder to everybody—or do something, anything, no matter what—to atone for this very unmistakable sense of gladness that seemed to pervade her whole being. She couldn't help it, because it was there; but she would do something by way of compensation. And the first thing she could think of was to go and brush the billiard-table with such thoroughness that Mr. Tom, when he came home, should say he had never seen it in such good condition before.

That was a roaring party that somewhat later came in—all flushed faces and high spirits and delight; for they had walked all the way from Falmer over the downs, under the guidance of the Canadian experience of Frank King; and

they had had wonderful adventures with the snow-drifts ; and the night was beautiful—a crescent moon in the south, and high up in the south-east the gleaming belt of Orion. And Nan greatly entered into the joy of these adventurers, and wished to hear more of their futile efforts at skating ; and was asking this one and the other about everything—until she found Mr. Tom's eyes fixed on her.

“Nan,” said he, with scrutiny and decision, “you've been in the country to-day, walking.”

She admitted she had.

“And you had for your luncheon a bit of bread and an apple.”

“I generally take that as a precaution,” Nan said, simply.

“I thought so,” said Mr. Tom, with great satisfaction at his own shrewdness. “I can tell in a minute. For you always come back looking highly pleased with yourself and inclined to be cheeky. I don't like the look of you when you're too set up. Your tongue gets too sharp. I'd advise you people to look out.”

Nan's conscience smote her. Was she so glad, then, that even outsiders saw it in her face ? She became graver ; and she vowed that she would be most reticent at dinner. Had she

not promised to herself to try to be ten times kinder to everybody?

And she very soon, at dinner, had an opportunity of displaying her generosity. They were busy making havoc of the manner of a distinguished person who was much talked of at that time, and whom they had all chanced to meet. Now Nan ordinarily was very intolerant of affectation; but had she not promised to be ten times kinder to everybody? So she struck in in defence of this lady.

"But it is her nature to be affected," said Nan. "She is quite true to herself. That is her disposition. It wouldn't be natural for her to try not to be affected. She was born with that disposition. Look at the idiotic grimaces that infants make when they try to show they are pleased. And Mrs. —— wouldn't be herself at all if she wasn't affected. She might as well try to leave off her affectations as her clothes. She couldn't go about without any."

"She goes about with precious little," said Mr. Tom, who strongly disapproved of scanty ball-dresses. And then he added, "But that's Nan all over. She's always for making the best of everything and everybody. It's always the best possible world with her."

"And isn't that wise," said Frank King, with

a laugh, "considering it's the only one we've got to live in at present?"

Nan was very bright and cheerful during this dinner, and Captain Frank King was most markedly attentive to her, and interested in her talking. When Nan began to speak, he seemed to consider that the whole table ought to listen; and his was the first look that approved, and the first laugh that followed. Then he discovered that she knew all sorts of out-of-the-way things that an ordinary young lady could by no possibility have been expected to know. It was more than ever clear to him that these solitary wanderings had taught her something. Where had she acquired all this familiarity, for example, with details about his own profession—or what had been his profession?

They went on to talk of the jeers of cabmen at each other, and how sharp some of them were. Then again they began to talk about other common sayings—the very origin of which had been forgotten; and Frank King spoke of a taunt which was an infallible recipe for driving a bargee mad—"Who choked the boy with duff?"—though nobody, not the bargees themselves, now knew anything whatever about the tragic incident that must have happened sometime and somewhere.

"Yes," said Nan at once, "and there is another like that that the collier-boats can't stand. If you call out to a collier, '*There's a rat in your chains,*' he'd drive his schooner ashore to get after you."

"I suppose you have tried," said her mother, with calm dignity.

"I believe Nan spends most of her time," said the Beauty, "in making mud-pies with the boys in Shoreham Harbour."

"Never you mind, Nan," her brother said, to encourage her. "Next time we go to Newhaven, you'll call out to the colliers, '*There's a rat in your chains,*' and I'll stop behind a wall and watch them beating you."

All during that dinner Nan was both amused and amusing, until a trifling little incident occurred. She and Frank King on the other side of the table had almost monopolised the conversation, although quite unwittingly; and everybody seemed to regard this as a matter of course. Now it happened that Madge, who sat next her betrothed, made some slight remark to him. Perhaps he did not hear. At all events, he did not answer, but addressed Nan instead, with reference to something she had just been saying about lifeboats. Instantly, a hurt expression came over Madge's face, and as instantly

Nan saw it. From that moment she grew more reserved. She avoided addressing herself directly to Captain Frank King. She devoted herself chiefly to her mother ; and when, at the end of dinner, they adjourned in a body to the billiard-room (with the happy indifference of youth) she followed Lady Beresford up to the drawing-room and would herself make tea for her.

That night Madge came into Nan's room.

"Do you know, Nan," she said, quite plainly, "that whenever you are in the room Frank pays no attention to any one else?"

"I thought he was doing his best to amuse everybody at dinner," Nan said—though she did not raise her eyes. "He told some very good stories."

"Yes, to you," Madge insisted. Then she added, "You know I like it. I hope he will always be good friends with all the family ; for you see, Nan, it will be lonely for me at Kings-court for a while, and of course I should like to have somebody from Brighton always in the house. And I know he admires you very much. He's always talking about your character, and your disposition, and your temperament, as if he had been studying you like a doctor. I suppose I've got no character, or he would talk about

that sometimes. I don't understand it—that talking about something inside you, as if it was something separate from yourself; and calling it all kinds of sentiments and virtues, as if it was clockwork you couldn't see. I don't see anything like that in you, Nan—except that you are very kind, you know—but not so different from other people—as he seems to think.”

“It doesn't much matter what he thinks, does it?” suggested Nan, gently.

“Oh no, of course not,” Madge said, promptly. “He said I was a very good skater, considering the horrid condition of the ice. They have a large lake at Kingscourt.” Then after a pause, “Nan, where did you learn all that about the lighthouses and the birds at night?”

“Oh, that? I really don't know. What about it?—it is of no consequence.”

“But it interests people.”

“It ought not to interest you, or Captain King either. You will have to think of very different things at Kingscourt.”

“When you and Mr. Jacomb come to Kings——”

“Madge,” said Nan, quickly, “you must not say anything like that. I do not mean to marry Mr. Jacomb, if that is what you mean.”

“No? Honour bright?”

"I shall not marry Mr. Jacomb ; and I am not likely to marry any one," she said, calmly. "There are other things one can give one's life to, I suppose. It would be strange if there were not."

Madge thought for a second or two.

"Oh, Nan," she said cheerfully, "it would be so nice to have an old-maid sister at Kingscourt. She could do such a lot of things, and be so nice and helpful, without the fuss and pretension of a married woman. It would be really delightful to have you at Kingscourt !"

"I hope, dear, you will be happy at Kingscourt," said Nan, in a somewhat lower voice.

"I shall never be quite happy until you come to stay there," said Madge, with decision.

"You will have plenty of occupation," said Nan, absently. "I have been thinking if a war broke out I should like to go as one of the nurses ; and of course that wants training beforehand. There must be an institution of some kind, I suppose. Now, good-night, dear."

"Good-night, Mother Nan. But we are not going to let you go away into wars. You are coming to Kingscourt. I know Frank will insist on it. And it would just be the very place for you ; you see you would be in nobody's way ;

and you always were so fond of giving help. Oh, Nan," her sister suddenly said, "what is the matter? You are crying! What is it, Nan?"

Nan rose quickly.

"Crying? No—no—never mind, Madge—I am tired rather—there—good-night."

She got her sister out of the room only in time. Her overstrained calmness had at length given way. She threw herself on the bed, and burst into a passion of weeping; and thus she lay far into the night, stifling her sobs so that no one should hear.

CHAPTER XX

THE SHADOW.

THE process of disenchantment is one of the saddest and one of the commonest things in life ; whether the cause of it be the golden youth who, apparently a very Bayard before marriage, after marriage gradually reveals himself to be hopelessly selfish, or develops a craving for brandy, or becomes merely brutal and ill-tempered ; or whether it is the creature of all angelic gifts and graces who, after her marriage, destroys the romance of domestic life by her slatternly ways, or sinks into the condition of a confirmed sigher, or in time discovers to her husband that he has married a woman comprising in herself, to use the American phrase, nine distinct sorts of a born fool. These discoveries are common in life ; but they generally follow marriage, which gives ample opportunities for study. Before marriage man and maid meet but at intervals ; and then both are alike on their best behaviour. The slattern is no slattern now ; she is always dainty

and nice and neat ; the golden youth is generous to a fault, and noble in all his ways ; and if either or both should be somewhat foolish, or even downright stupid, the lack of wisdom is concealed by a tender smile or a soft touch of the hand. It is the dream-time of life ; and it is not usual for one to awake until it is over.

But it was different with Frank King. The conditions in which he was placed were altogether peculiar. He had made two gigantic mistakes—the first in imagining that any two human beings could be alike : the second in imagining that, even if they were alike, he could transfer his affection from the one to the other—and he was now engaged in a hopeless and terrible struggle to convince himself that these were not mistakes. He would not see that Madge Beresford was very different from Nan. He was determined to find in her all he had hoped to find. He argued with himself that she was just like Nan, as Nan had been at her age. Madge was so kind, and good, and nice ; of course it would all come right in the end.

At the same time, he never wished to be alone with Madge, as is the habit of lovers. Nor if he was suddenly interested in anything did he naturally turn to her, and call her attention. On the other hand, the little social circle did

not seem complete when Nan, with her grave humour, and her quiet smile, and her gentle, kindly ways, was absent. When she came into the room, then satisfaction and rest were in the very air. If there was a brighter green on the sea, where a gleam of wintry sunshine struck the roughened waters, whose eyes but Nan's could see that properly? It was she whom he addressed on all occasions; perhaps unwittingly. It seemed so easy to talk to Nan. For the rest, he shut his eyes to other considerations. From the strange fascination and delight that house in Brunswick Terrace always had for him, he knew he must be in love with somebody there; and who could that be but Madge Beresford, seeing that he was engaged to her?

Unhappily for poor Madge, Frank King was now called home by the old people at Kings-court; and for a time, at least, all correspondence between him and his betrothed would obviously have to be by letter. Madge was in great straits. A look, a smile, a touch of the fingers may make up for lack of ideas; but letter-writing peremptorily demands them, of some kind or another. As usual, Madge came to her elder sister.

"Oh, Nan, I do so hate letter-writing. I promised to write every morning. I don't know

what in the world to say. It is such a nuisance."

Nan was silent ; of late she had tried to withdraw as much as possible from these confidences of her sister's ; but not very successfully. Madge clung to her. Lady Beresford would not be bothered. Edith was busy with her own affairs. But Nan—old Mother Nan—who had nothing to think of but other people, might as well begin and play the old maid at once, and give counsel in these distressing affairs.

"I wish you would tell me what to say," continued Madge, quite coolly.

"I ? Oh, I cannot," said Nan, almost shuddering, and turning away.

"But you know what interests him ; for he's always talking to you," persisted Madge, good-naturedly. "Anybody but me would be jealous ; but I'm not. The day before yesterday Mrs. —— went by ; and I asked him to look at her hair, that every one is raving about ; and he plainly told me your hair was the prettiest he had ever seen. Now, I don't call that polite. He might have said 'except yours,' if only for the look of the thing. But I don't mind—not a bit. I'm very glad he likes you, Nan——"

"Madge ! Madge !"

It was almost a cry wrung from the heart.

But in an instant she had controlled herself again. She turned to her sister, and said with great apparent calmness,

"Surely, dear, you ought to know what to write. These are things that cannot be advised about. Letters of that kind are secret——"

"Oh, I don't care about that. I think it is stupid," said Madge at once. "There is no use having any pretence about it. And I don't know in the world what to write about. Look,—I have begun about the Kenyons' invitation, and asked him whether he'd mind my going. I like those little dances better than the big balls——"

She held out the letter she had begun. But Nan would not even look at it.

"It isn't usual, is it, Madge," she said, hurriedly, "for a girl who is engaged to go out to a dance by herself?"

"But we are all going!"

"You know what I mean. It is a compliment you should pay him not to go."

"Well," said Madge somewhat defiantly, "I don't know about that. One does as one is done by. And I don't think he'd care if I went and danced the whole night through—even with Jack Hanbury."

"Oh, how can you say such a thing!" said

her sister, staring at her; for this was a new development altogether.

But Madge was not to be put down.

"Oh, I am not such a fool. I can see well enough. There isn't much romance about the whole affair; and that's the short and the long of it. Of course it's a very good arrangement for both of us, I believe; and that's what they say now-a-days—marriages 'are arranged.'"

"I don't know what you mean, Madge! You never spoke like that before."

"Perhaps I was afraid of frightening you; for you have high and mighty notions of things, dear Nan, for all your mouse-like ways. But don't I see very well that he is marrying to please his parents; and to settle down and be the good boy of the family? That's the meaning of the whole thing——"

"You don't mean to say, Madge," said the elder sister, though she hesitated, and seemed to have to force herself to ask the question, "You don't mean to say you think he does not—love you?"

At this Madge flushed up a little, and said—

"Oh, well, I suppose he does, in a kind of way, though he doesn't take much trouble about saying it. It isn't of much consequence; we shall have plenty of time afterwards. Mind, if

only Jack Hanbury could get invited by the Kenyons, and I were to dance two or three times with him, and Frank get to hear of it, I suppose there would be a noble rampage : *then* he might speak out a little more."

"Have you been dreaming, Madge?" said Nan, again staring at her sister. "What has put such monstrous things into your head? Mr. Hanbury—at the Kenyons'—and you would dance with him!"

"Well, why not?" said Madge, with a frown; for this difficulty about the letter-writing had clearly operated on her temper and made her impatient. "All the world isn't supposed to know about the Vice-Chancellor's warning. Why shouldn't he be invited by the Kenyons? And why should he know that I am going? And why, if we both happen to be there, shouldn't we dance together? Human beings are human beings, in spite of Vice-Chancellors. They can't lock up a man for dancing with you? At all events, they can't lock me up, even if Jack is there."

"Madge, put these things out of your head. You won't go to the Kenyons', for Captain King would not like it——"

"I don't think he'll take the trouble to object," Madge interjected.

“And Mr. Hanbury won’t be there; and there will be no dancing, and no quarrel. If you wish to write to Captain King about what will interest him, write about what interests yourself. That he is sure to be interested in——”

“Well, but that is exactly what I can’t write to him about. I know what I am interested in well enough. Edith has just told me Mr. Roberts has been pressing her to fix a time for their marriage. She thinks the end of April; so that they could be back in London for the latter end of the season. Now I think that would do very well for us too—and it is always nice for two sisters to get married on the same day—only Frank has never asked me a word about it, and how am I to write to him about it? So you see, wise Mother Nan, I can’t write to him about what interests me.”

Nan had started somewhat when she heard this proposal; it seemed strange to her.

“April?” she said. “You’ve known Captain King a very short time, Madge. You were not thinking of getting married in April next?”

“Perhaps I’d better wait until I’m asked,” said Madge, with a laugh, as she turned to go away. “Well, if you won’t tell me what to

write about, I must go and get this bothered letter done somehow. I do believe the best way will be to write about you ; that will interest him anyway."

Frank King remained away for a few weeks, and during this time the first symptoms appeared of the coming spring. The days began to lengthen, there were crocuses in the gardens, there were reports of primroses and sweet violets in the woods about Horsham ; in London Parliament was sitting, and in Brighton well-known faces were recognisable amongst the promenaders on the Saturday afternoons. Then Mr. Roberts, as Edith's accepted suitor, received many invitations to the house in Brunswick Terrace ; and in return was most indefatigable in arranging riding-parties, driving-parties, walking-parties, with in each case a good hotel for luncheon as his objective point. Madge joined in these diversions with great good-will ; and made them the excuse for the shortness of the letters addressed to Kingscourt. Nan went also ; she was glad to get into the country on any pretence ; and she seemed merry enough. When Mr. Roberts drove along the King's Road with these three comely damsels under his escort, he was a proud man ; and he may have comforted himself with the question, that as beer

sometimes led to a baronetcy, why shouldn't soda-water?

Strangely enough, Nan had entirely ceased making inquiries about sisterhoods and institutions for the training of nurses. She seemed quite reconciled to the situation of things as they were. She did not cease her long absences from the house ; but every one knew that on these occasions she was off on one of her solitary wanderings ; and she came home in the evening apparently more contented than ever. She had even brought herself to speak of Madge's married life, which at first she would not do.

"You see," she said to her sister on one occasion, "if you and Edith get married on the same day, I must remain and take care of mamma ; she must not be left quite alone."

"Oh, as for that," said Madge, "Mrs. Arthurs does better than the whole of us ; and I'm not going to have you made a prisoner of. I'm going to have a room at Kingscourt called 'Nan's room,' and it shall have no other name as long as I am there. Then we shall have a proper house in London by and by ; and of course you'll come up for the season, and see all the gaieties. I think we ought to have one of the red houses just by Prince's ; that would be handy for everything ; and you might come up,

Nan, and help me to buy things for it. And you shall have a room there too, you shall; and you may decorate it and furnish it just as you like. I know quite well what you would like—the room small; the woodwork all bluey-white; plenty of Venetian embroidery flung about; all the fire-place brass; some of those green Persian plates over the mantelpiece; about thirteen thousand Chinese fans arranged like fireworks on the walls; a fearful quantity of books and a low easy-chair; red candles; and in the middle of the whole thing a nasty, dirty, little beggar-girl to feed and pet——”

“I think, Madge,” her sister said, gravely, “that you should not set your heart on a town house at all. Remember, old Mr. King is giving his son Kingscourt at a great sacrifice. As I understand it, it will be a long time before the family estate is what it has been; and you would be very ungrateful if you were extravagant——”

“Oh, I don’t see that,” said Madge. “They are conferring no favour on me. I don’t see why I should economise. I am marrying for fun, not for love.”

She blurted out this inadvertently—to Nan’s amazement and horror—but instantly retracted it, with the blood rushing to her temples.

“Of course I don’t mean that, Nan—how

could I have been so stupid? I don't mean *that*—*exactly*. What I mean is that it doesn't seem to me as if it was supposed to be a very fearfully romantic match, and all that kind of thing. It's a very good arrangement; but it isn't I who ought to be expected to make sacrifices——"

"But surely your husband's interests will be yours!" exclaimed Nan.

"Oh yes, certainly," her sister said, somewhat indifferently. "No doubt that's true, in a way. Quite true, in a kind of way. Still, there are limits; and I should not like to be buried alive for ever in the country."

Then she sighed.

"Poor Jack!" she said.

She went to the window.

"When I marry, I know at least one who will be sorry. I can fancy him walking up and down there—looking at the house as he used to do; and, oh! so grateful if only you went to the window for a moment. He will see it in the papers, I suppose."

"She turned to her sister, and said, triumphantly—

"Well, the Vice-Chancellor was done that time!"

"What time?"

"Valentine's morning. You can send flowers

without any kind of writing to be traced. Do you think I don't know who sent me the flowers?"

"At all events, you should not be proud of it. You should be sorry. It is a very great pity——"

"Yes, that's what I think," said Madge. "How can I help pitying him? It wouldn't be natural not to pity him, Vice-Chancellor or no Vice-Chancellor. I hate that man."

"I say it is a great pity that Mr. Hanbury does not accept his dismissal as inevitable; and as for you Madge, you ought not even to think of him. Captain King sent you that beautiful card-case on Valentine's morning; that is what you should remember."

"Captain King could send me a white elephant if he chose," said Madge, spitefully. "There's no danger to him in anything he does. It's different with poor Jack."

"Madge," said her sister, seriously, "do you know that you are talking as if you looked forward to this marriage with regret?"

"Oh no, I don't—I'm not such a fool," said Madge, plainly. "I know it's stupid to think about Jack Hanbury; but still, one has got a little feeling."

Then she laughed.

"I will tell you another secret, Nan. If he daren't write to me, he can send me things. He sent me a book—a novel—and I know he meant me to think the hero himself. For he was disappointed in love, too, and wrote beautifully about his sufferings, and at last the poor fellow blew his brains out."

"Well, Mr. Hanbury couldn't do that, at all events—for reasons," Nan said.

"Now that is a very bad joke," said Madge, in a sudden outburst of temper; "an old, stupid, bad joke, that has been made a hundred times. I'm ashamed of you, Nan. They say you have a great sense of humour; that's when you say things they can't understand; and they pretend to have a great sense of humour too. But where's the humour in that?"

"But Madge, dear," said Nan, gently, "I didn't mean to say anything against Mr. Hanbury——"

"In any case, there is one in this house who does not despise Mr. Hanbury for being poor," said Madge, hotly. "It isn't his fault that his papa and mamma haven't given him money and sent him out into the world to buy a wife!"

And therewith she quickly went to the door and opened it, and went out and shut it again with something very closely resembling a slam.

CHAPTER XXI.

DANGER AHEAD.

NAN waited the return of Frank King with the deepest anxiety. She would see nothing in these wild words of Madge's but an ebullition of temper. She could not bring herself to believe that her own sister—a girl with every thing around her she could desire in the world—would deliberately enter upon one of those hateful marriages of convenience. It was true, Nan had to confess to herself, that Madge was not very impressionable. There was no great depth in her nature. Then she was a trifle vain, and liked admiration; and she was evidently pleased to have a handsome and certainly eligible suitor. But no—it was impossible that she had really meant what she said. When Captain King came back, then the true state of affairs would be seen. Madge was not going to marry for money or position—or even out of spite.

And when Frank King did come back, matters looked very well at first. Madge received him

in a very nice, friendly fashion, and was pleased by certain messages from the old folks at Kingscourt. Nan's fears began to fade away. Nothing more was heard of Jack Hanbury. So far as Madge was concerned everything seemed right.

But Nan, who was very anxious, and on that account unusually sensitive, seemed to detect something strange in Frank King's manner. He had nothing of the gay audacity of an accepted suitor. When he paid Madge any little attention it appeared almost an effort. He was preoccupied and thoughtful; sometimes, after regarding Madge in silence, he would apparently wake up to the consciousness that he ought to be more attentive to her: but there did not seem to be much joyousness in their relationship. When these two happened to be together—during the morning stroll down the Pier, or on the way home from church, or seated at a concert—they did not seem to have many things to speak about. Frank King grew more and more grave; and Nan saw it, and wondered and quite failed to guess at the reason.

The fact was that he had now discovered what a terrible mistake he had made. He could blind himself no longer. Madge was not Nan; nor anything approaching to Nan; they were as dif-

ferent as day and night. Face to face with this discovery, he asked himself what he ought to do. Clearly, if he had made a mistake, it was his first duty that no one else should suffer by it. Because he was disappointed in not finding in Madge certain qualities and characteristics he had expected to find, he was not going to withdraw from an engagement he had voluntarily entered into. It was not Madge's fault. If the prospect of his marriage pleased her, he was bound to fulfil his promise. After all, Madge had her own qualities. Might they not wear as well through the rough work of the world, even if they had not for him the fascination he had hoped for? In any case, the disappointment should be his, not hers. She should not suffer any slight. And then he would make another desperate resolve to be very affectionate and attentive to her; resolves which usually ended in his carrying to her some little present of flowers, or something like that, having presented which, he would turn and talk to Nan.

"I say, Beresford," he suddenly observed, one night at dinner, "I have an invitation to go salmon-fishing in Ireland. Will you come?"

"Well, but——" Madge interposed, with an injured air, as if she ought to have been consulted first.

"I should like it tremendously!" said Mr. Tom, with a rush.

"I am told the scenery in the neighbourhood is very fine," continued Captain King; "at all events we are sure to think so half a dozen years hence. That is one of the grand points about one's memory; you forget all the trivial details and discomforts, and only remember the best."

He quite naturally turned to Nan.

"I am sure, Miss Nan," he said, "you have quite a series of beautiful little pictures in your mind about that Splügen excursion. Don't you remember the drive along the Via Mala, in the shut-up carriage—the darkness outside—and the swish of the rain——"

"Well," said Madge, somewhat spitefully, "considering you were in a closed carriage and driving through darkness, I don't see much of a beautiful picture to remember!"

He did not seem to heed. It was Nan he was addressing; and there was a pleased light in her eyes. Reminiscences are to some people very delightful things.

"And you recollect the crowded saloon in the Splügen inn, and the snug little corner we got near the stove, and the little table. That's where you discovered the use of stupid people at dinner-parties——"

"What's that?" Mr. Tom demanded to know.

"It's a secret," Captain King answered, with a laugh. "And I think you were rather down-hearted next morning—until we began to get up through the clouds. That is a picture to remember at all events—a Christmas picture in summer time. Do you remember how green the pines looked above the snow? And how blue the sky was when the mist got driven over? And how business-like you looked in your ulster—buttoned up to the chin for resolute Alpine work. I fancy I can hear now the very chirp of your boots on the wet snow—it was very silent away up there."

"I know," said Nan, somewhat shamefacedly, "that when I saw '*Ristoratore*' stuck up on the house near the top, I thought it was a place for restoring people found in the snow, until I heard the driver call out '*Du, hole Schnapps.*'"

"Wasn't that a wild whirl down the other side!" he continued delightedly. "But you should have come into the Customs-house with me when I went to declare my cigars. You see it wouldn't do for me, who might one day get a coastguard appointment, to try on any smuggling. But I did remonstrate. I said I had already paid at Paris and at Basel; and that it

was hard to have to pay three import dues on my cigars. Well, they were very civil. They said they couldn't help it. 'Why not buy your cigars in the country where you smoke them?' asked an old gentleman in spectacles. 'Because, Monsieur,' I answered him, with the usual cheek of the English, 'I prefer to smoke cigars made of tobacco.' But he was quite polite. After charging me eighteen francs, he bowed me out, and said 'a rivederla;' to which I responded 'Oh, no, thank you;' and then I found you and your sister all laughing at me, as if I had been before a police magistrate to be admonished."

"You don't forget all the disagreeable details, then?" said Nan, with a smile.

But the smile vanished from her face when he began to talk about Bellagio. He did so without any covert intention. It was always a joy to him to think or talk about the time that he and the three sisters spent together far away there in the south. And it was only about the *Serenata* and the procession of illuminated boats that he was thinking at this moment.

"I suppose they will sooner or later have all our ships and steamers lit with the electric light; and everything will be ghastly white and ghastly black. But do you remember how soft and beautiful the masses of yellow stars were when

the boats came along the lake in the darkness? It was indeed a lovely night. And I think we had the best of it—sitting there in the garden. I know I for one didn't miss the music a bit. And then it was still more lovely when the moon rose; and you could see the water, and the mountains on the other side, and even the houses by the shore. I remember there was a bush somewhere near us that scented all the air——”

Madge had been regarding her sister closely.

“It must have been a magical night,” she said quickly, “for Nan's face has got quite white just thinking of it.”

He started. A quick glance at the girl beside him showed him that she was indeed pale; her eyes cast down; her hand trembling. Instantly he said in a confused hurry,—

“You see, Miss Anne, there was some delay about the concert. One steamer did really come back to Bellagio. We had our serenade all the same—that is to say, any who were awake. You see, they did not intend to swindle you——”

“Oh, no! oh, no!” said Nan; and then, conscious that Madge was still regarding her, she added with a desperate effort at composure,—

"We heard some pretty music on the water at Venice. Edith picked up some of the airs. She will play them to you after dinner."

That same night, as usual, Madge came into Nan's room, just before going off.

"Nan," she said, looking straight at her, "what was it upset you about Frank's reminding you of Bellagio?"

"Bellagio?" repeated Nan, with an effort to appear unconscious, but with her eyes turned away.

"Yes; you know very well."

"I know that I was thinking of something quite different from anything that Captain King was saying," Nan said, at length. "And—and it is of no consequence to you, Madge, believe me."

Madge regarded her suspiciously for a second, and then said, with an air of triumph,

"At all events, he isn't going to Ireland."

"Oh, indeed," Nan answered, gently. "Well I'm glad; I suppose you prefer his not going?"

"It nearly came to a quarrel, I know," said Madge, frankly. "I thought it just a bit too cool. At all events, he ought to pretend to care a little for me."

"Oh, Madge, how can you say such things? Care for you—and he has asked you to be

his wife ! Could he care for you more than that ? ”

“ He has never even thanked me for not going to the Kenyons’ ball,” said Madge, who appeared to imagine that Nan was responsible for everything Captain King did or did not do.

“ Surely he would take it for granted you would not go ! ” remonstrated the elder sister.

“ But he takes everything for granted. And he scarcely ever thinks it worth while to speak to me. And I know it will be a regular bore when we go to Kingscourt, with the old people still there, and me not mistress at all ; and what am I to do ? ”

She poured out this string of wild complaints rapidly and angrily.

“ Good-night, Madge,” said Nan ; “ I am rather tired to-night.”

“ Good-night. But I can tell you if he hadn’t given up Ireland, there would have been a row.”

It was altogether a strange condition of affairs ; and next day it was apparently made worse. There had been a stiffish gale blowing all night from the south ; and in the morning, though the sky was cloudless, there was a heavy sea running, so that from the windows they saw white masses of foam springing into the air—

hurled back by the sea-wall at the end of Medina Terrace. When Captain King came along Mr. Tom at once proposed they should all of them take a stroll as far as the Terrace; for now the tide was full up and the foam was springing into the blue sky to a most unusual height. And, indeed, when they arrived they found a pretty big crowd collected; a good many of whom had obviously been caught unawares by the shifting and swirling masses of spray. It was a curious sight. First the great wave came rolling on with but little beyond an ominous hissing noise; then there was a heavy shock that made the earth tremble, and at the same moment a roar as of thunder; then into the clear sky rose a huge wall of gray, illuminated by the sunlight, and showing clearly and blackly the big stones and smaller shingle that had been caught and whirled up in the seething mass. Occasionally a plank of drift timber was similarly whirled up—some thirty or forty feet; disappearing altogether again as it fell crashing into the roar of the retreating wave. It was a spectacle, moreover, that changed every few seconds, as the heavy volumes of the sea hit the breakwater at different angles. The air was thick with the salt spray; and hot with the sunlight—even on this March morning.

Then it became time for Mr. Tom and Captain Frank to go and witness a challenge game of rackets that had been much talked of; and the girls walked back with them as far as Brunswick Terrace, Madge being with Frank King.

"Why is it one never sees Mr. Jacomb now?" he asked of his companion.

"I saw him only the other day," she said evasively.

"But he does not come to the house, does he?"

"N—no," said Madge.

"Has he left Brighton?"

"Oh, no," answered Madge, and she drew his attention to a brig that was making up Channel under very scant sail indeed.

"I daresay he has a good deal of work to do," said Frank King absently. "When are they going to be married?"

Madge saw that the revelation could be put off no longer.

"Oh, but they are not going to be married. Nan isn't going to be married at all."

He stared at her, as if he had scarcely heard her aright; and then he said slowly—

"Nan isn't going to be married? Why have you never told me before?"

“Oh, it is a private family matter,” said Madge, petulantly. “It is not to be talked about. Besides, how could I know it would interest you?”

He remained perfectly silent and thoughtful. They walked along. Madge began to think she had been too ungracious.

“I suppose she tried to bring herself to it for a time,” she said, more gently, “She has wonderful ideas, Nan has; and I suppose she thought she could do a deal of good as a clergyman’s wife. For my part, I don’t see what she could do more than she does at present. It’s just what she’s fit for. Poor people don’t resent her going into their houses as they would if it was you or I. She manages it somehow. That’s how she gets to know all about out-of-the-way sort of things; she’s practical; and people think it strange that a young lady like her should know the ways and habits of common people; and that’s why she interests them when she talks. There’s nothing wonderful in it. Anybody can find out what the profit is on selling oranges, if you like to go and talk to a hideous old wretch who is smelling of gin. But I don’t say anything against Nan. It’s her way. It’s what she was intended for by Providence, I do believe. But she was sold that time she wanted

to get up a little committee to send a constant supply of books and magazines to the light-houses—circulating, you know. She wrote to Sir George about it; and found the Admiralty did that already.”

There was a strange, hopeless, tired look on this man's face. He did not seem to hear her. He appeared to know nothing of what was going on around him.

When they reached the door of the house, he said,—

“Good-bye!”

“Good-bye?” she repeated, inquiringly. “I thought we were all going to see the Exhibition of Paintings this afternoon.”

“I think I must go up to London for a few days,” he said, with some hesitation. “There—is some business——”

She said no more; but turned and went indoors without a word. He bade good-bye to Edith and to Nan—not looking into Nan's face at all. Then he left with the brother, and Mr. Tom was silent, for his friend King seemed much disturbed about something, and he did not wish to worry him.

As for Madge, she chose to work herself into a pretty passion, though she said nothing. That she should have been boasting of her

triumph in inducing, or forcing, him to give up that visit to Ireland only to find him going off to London without warning or explanation, was altogether insufferable. She was gloomy and morose all the afternoon ; would not go to see the pictures ; refused to come in and speak to certain callers ; and at dinner made a little show of sarcasm that did not hurt anybody very much.

The evening brought her a letter. Thus it ran :—

“Dear Madge—I thought you looked angry when you went indoors this morning. Don’t quarrel about such a trifle as my going to London. I shall be back in two or three days ; and hope to bring with me the big photograph of Kingseourt, if they have got any copies printed yet.

“Your FRANK.”

“From whom is your letter, Madge ?” Lady Beresford said, incidentally.

“From Frank, mamma,” said the young lady, as she quietly and determinedly walked across the room and—thrust it into the fire !

That same night Miss Madge also wrote a note ; but the odd thing was that the writing of both note and address was in a disguised hand.

And when, some little time thereafter, the others were in the billiard-room, it was Madge herself who slipped out from the house and went and dropped that missive into the nearest pillar letter-box.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CATASTROPHE.

HOWEVER, Madge's ill-temper was never of long duration ; and at this particular time, instead of sinking farther into sulks over the absence of her lover, she grew day by day more joyous and generous and affectionate. The change was most marked ; and Nan, who was her sister's chief confidant, could not make it out at all. Her gaiety became almost hysterical ; and her kindness to everybody in the house ran to extravagance. She bought trinkets for the servants. She presented Mr. Tom with a boot-jack mounted in silver ; and he was pleased to say that it was the first sensible present he had ever known a girl make. But it was towards Nan that she was most particularly affectionate and caressing.

" You know I'm not clever, Nan," she said, in a burst of confidence, " and I haven't got clock-works in my brain, and I daresay I'm not interesting—to everybody. But I know girls who are

stupider than I am who are made plenty of. And of course, if you don't have any romance when you're young, when are you likely to get it after?"

"But I don't know what you mean, Madge!" Nan exclaimed.

Nor did Madge explain at the moment. She continued—

"I believe it was you, Nan, who told me of the young lady who remarked, 'What's the use of temptation if you don't yield to it?'"

"That was only a joke," said Nan, with her demure smile.

"Oh, I think there's sense in it," said the practical Madge. "It doesn't do to be too wise when you're young."

"It so seldom happens, Madge!" said her sister.

"There you are again, old Mother Hubbard, with your preaching! But I'm not going to quarrel with you this time. I want your advice. I want you to tell me what little thing I should buy for Frank, just to be friends all round, don't you know?"

"Friends? Yes, I hope so!" said Nan, with a grave smile. "But how can I tell you, Madge? I don't know, as you ought to know, what Captain King has in the way of cigar-cases or such things——"

"But call him Frank, Nan! Do, to please me. And I know he would like it."

"Some time I may," said Nan evasively. "Afterwards, perhaps."

"When you come to Kingscourt," said Madge, with a curious kind of laugh.

Nan was silent, and turned away; she never seemed to wish to speak of Kingscourt or her going there.

Frank King's stay in London was prolonged for some reason or other; at length he announced his intention of returning to Brighton on a particular Thursday. On the Tuesday night Nan and Madge arranged that they would get fresh flowers the next day for the decoration of the rooms.

"And this is what I will do for you, Madge, as it is a special occasion," remarked Miss Anne, with grave patronage. "If you will get up early to-morrow, I will take you to a place, not more than four miles off, where you will find any quantity of hart's-tongue fern. It is a deep ditch, I suppose a quarter of a mile long, and the banks are covered. Of course I don't want any one to know, for it is so near Brighton it would be harried for the shops; but I will show you the place, as you will soon be going away now; and we can take a basket."

"But how did you find it out, Nan?"

"Some one showed it to me."

"The singing-woman, I suppose?"

"Yes. Think of that. I believe she could get twopence a root; and she might fill a cart there. But she won't touch one."

"No," said Edith, with a superior smile. "She leaves that for young ladies who could very well afford to go to a florist's."

"What I shall take won't hurt," said Nan, meekly.

So, next morning, Nan got up about eight; dressed, and was ready to start. That is to say, she never arranged her programme for the day with the slightest respect to meals. So long as she could get an apple and a piece of bread to put in her pocket she felt provided against everything. However, she thought she would go along to Madge's room, and see if that young lady had ideas about breakfast.

Madge's room was empty; and Nan thought it strange she should have gone downstairs without knocking at her door in passing. But when Nan also went below she found that Madge had left the house before any one was up. She could not understand it at all.

Mr. Tom came down.

"Oh," said he, indifferently, "she wants to

be mighty clever and find out those ferns for herself."

"But I did not tell her where they were. I only said they were on the road to——" said Nan, naming the place: the writer has reasons of his own for not being more explicit.

"All the cleverer if she can find out. The cheek of the young party is pyramidal," said Mr. Tom, as he rang for breakfast.

But at lunch, also, Madge had not turned up.

"It is very extraordinary," said Lady Beresford, though she was too languid to be deeply concerned.

"Oh no, it isn't, mother," said Mr. Tom. "It's all Nan's fault. Nan has infected her. The Baby, you'll see, has taken to tramping about the country with gipsies; and prowling about farmers' kitchens; and catching leverets, and stuff. We lives on the simple fruits of the earth, my dears; we eats of the root, and we drinks of the spring; but that doesn't prevent us having a whacking appetite somewhere about seven forty-five. Edith, my love, pass me the cayenne-pepper."

"Boys shouldn't use cayenne-pepper," said Nan.

"And babies should speak only when they're spoken to," he observed. "Mother, dear, I

have arrived at the opinion that Madge has run away with young Hanbury. I am certain of it. The young gentleman is fool enough for anything——”

“You always were spiteful against Mr. Hanbury,” said Edith, “because his feet are smaller than yours.”

“My love,” retorted Mr. Tom, with imperturbable good-nature, “his feet may be small. It is in his stupidity that he is really great. Jack Hanbury can only be described in the words of the American poet: he is a commodious ass.”

Now this conjecture of Mr. Tom’s about the cause of Madge’s disappearance was only a piece of gay facetiousness. It never did really occur to him that any one—that any creature with a head capable of being broken—would have the wild audacity to run away with one of his sisters, while he, Mr. Tom Beresford, was to the fore. But that afternoon post brought Nan a letter. She was amazed to see by the handwriting that it was from Madge; she was still more alarmed when she read these words, scrawled with a trembling hand, and in pencil:

“Dearest, dearest Nan, don’t be angry. By the time you get this Jack and I will be married. It is all for the best, dear Nan; and you will pacify

them ; and it is no use following us ; for we shall be in France until it is all smoothed down. Not a single bridesmaid—we daren't—but what wouldn't I do for Jack's sake ? It is time I did something to make up for all he has suffered—he was looking so ill—in another month he would have *died*. He worships me. You never saw anything like it. Jack has just come back ; so good-bye : from your loving, loving sister, MARGARET HANBURY.—Do you know who that is, Nan ? ”

Nan, not a little frightened, took the letter to her brother, and gave it him without a word. But Mr. Tom's rage was at once prompt and voluble. That she should have disgraced the family—for, of course, the whole thing would be in the papers ! That she should have cheated and jilted his most particular friend ! But as for this fellow Hanbury——

“ I said it all along. I told you what would come of it ! I knew that fellow was haunting her like a shadow. Well, we'll see how a shadow likes being locked up on bread and water. Oh, it's no use your protesting, Nan ; I will let the law take its course. We'll see how he likes that. ‘ Stone walls do not a prison make ’—that's what love-sick fellows say ; don't they ? Wait a bit. Mr. Jack Hanbury will find that stone walls

make a very good imitation of a prison, at all events——”

“But, Tom—dear Tom,” Nan pleaded, “it is no use making matters worse. Let us try to make them better. If Madge is married, it can’t be helped now. We must make the best of it——”

He paid no attention to her; he was still staring at the ill-written letter.

“That’s all gammon about their going to France. He hasn’t money for travelling. She spent all hers in nick-nacks—to propitiate people, the sneak! They’re in London.”

He looked at his watch.

“I can just catch the 5.45 express. Nan, you go and tell the others; they needn’t squawk about it all over Brighton.”

“What are you going to do, Tom?” said his sister, breathlessly.

“Find out where they are first. Then Colonel Fitzgerald and Mr. Mason must take it up. Then Mr. Jack Hanbury will suddenly find himself inside Millbank prison.”

She caught him by the hand.

“Tom, is it wise?” she pleaded again. “They are married. What is the use of revenge? You don’t want to make your own sister miserable?——”

"She has brought it on herself," he said, roughly.

"Then that is what I am to think of you," she said, regarding him, "that some day I may hear you talk in that way about me?"

He never could resist the appeal of Nan's clear, faithful eyes.

"You wouldn't be such a fool," he said. "And they won't touch Madge. It's only that fellow they'll go for—the mean hound, to marry a girl for her money."

"How do you know it was for her money, Tom?" Nan pleaded. "I am certain they were fond of each other——"

"I don't want to miss my train," said he. "You go and tell the maternal I'm off to London. I suppose you don't know the address of Hanbury's father?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, I'm off. Ta, ta!"

So the irate Mr. Tom departed. But in the comparative silence of the Pullman car the fury of his rage began to abate; and it dawned upon him that, after all, Nan's counsel might have something in it. No doubt these two young fools—as he mentally termed them—were married by this time. He still clung to the idea that Jack Hanbury deserved punishment—

a horse-whipping or something of the kind ; but Madge was Madge. She was silly ; and she had “ got into a hole ; ” still, she was Madge. She might be let off with a serious lecture on her folly and on her disregard of what she owed to the other members of the family. Only, the first thing was to find out their whereabouts.

On arriving in London he drove to his club, and after some little searching discovered that Mr. Gregory Hanbury’s address was Adelphi Terrace, whither he at once repaired. Mr. Hanbury was at dinner. He sent up his card nevertheless, and asked to be allowed to see Mr. Hanbury on particular business. The answer was a request that he would step upstairs into the dining-room.

He found that occupied by two gentlemen who were dining together at the upper end of a large table. One came forward to meet him. He took it for granted this was Mr. Hanbury—a slight, short man, with black hair and eyes, and a very stiff white cravat.

“ Mr. Beresford,” said he, “ I can guess what has brought you here. Let me introduce you to my brother—Major Hanbury. It is an unfortunate business.”

The other gentleman—also slight and short, but with a sun-browned, dried-up face, and

big gray moustache—bowed and resumed his seat.

“You know, then, that your son has run away with my sister,” said Mr. Tom, somewhat hotly—though he had determined to keep his temper. “Perhaps you know also where they are?”

“No farther,” said the black-haired gentleman, with perfect calmness, “than that I believe them to be in London. It is only about a couple of hours since I heard of the whole affair. I immediately sent for my brother. It is a most distressing business altogether. Of course you are chiefly concerned for your sister; but my son is in a far more serious position.”

“Yes, I should think so!” exclaimed Mr. Tom. “I should think he was! But you don’t know where they are?”

“No; I only know they are in London. I received a letter from my son this afternoon, asking me to intercede for him with the Court of Chancery; and it is from this letter that I learn how serious his position is—more serious than he seems to imagine. He appears to think that now the marriage has taken place, the Vice-Chancellor will condone everything——”

“He won’t: I will take good care that he shan’t!” Mr. Tom said.

"My dear sir, I am sorry to say that my son is in a very awkward situation, even although no personal vindictiveness be shown towards him. Your sister is not of age, I believe?"

"Of course not. She's just turned eighteen."

"Ah. Then, you see, Jack had to declare that she was of age. And he appears to have stated that he had resided three weeks in the parish, whereas he only came up from Brighton yesterday morning. And, again, marrying in the direct teeth of an order of the Court—I am afraid, sir, that he is in a bad enough predicament without any personal vengeance being shown him."

This seemed to strike Mr. Tom.

"I don't hit a man when he's down. I will let the law take its course. I shan't interfere."

"Don't you think, sir," said this man with the calm black eyes and the quiet manner, "that it might be wiser, in the interests of your sister, if you were to help us to arrange some amicable settlement which we could put before the Court? I believe the guardians of the young lady were very much misinformed about my son's character and his intentions with regard to her. I am certain that it was not her fortune that attracted him, or that could have

led him into the perilous position he now occupies. Now, if we could go before the Vice-Chancellor, and say, 'The marriage is not so unsuitable, after all. The young man comes of a highly respectable family. His relations (that is, my brother and myself, sir,) are willing to place a substantial sum at his disposal for investment in a sound business—' indeed, there is a brewery at Southampton that my brother has just been speaking of——"

"A brewery!" exclaimed Mr. Tom; but he instantly recollected that beer was as good as soda-water from a social point of view.

"And if we could say to the Vice-Chancellor that the friends of the young lady were willing to condone his offence—always providing, of course, and naturally, that your sister's fortune should be strictly settled upon herself—then, perhaps, he might be let off with a humble apology to the Court; and the young people be left to their own happiness. My dear sir, we lawyers see so much of the inevitable hardship of human life, that when a chance occurs of friendly compromise——"

"That's all very well," blurted out Mr. Tom. "But I call it very mean and shabby of him to inveigle my sister away like that. She was engaged to be married to an old friend of mine;

a much better fellow, I'll be bound! I call it very shabby."

"My dear sir," said the lawyer, placidly, "I do not seek for a moment to excuse my son's conduct, except to remind you that at a certain period of life romance counts for something. I believe many young ladies are like the young lady in the play—I really forget what her name was—who was disappointed to find that she was not to be run away with. However, that is a different matter. I put it to you whether it would not be better for every one concerned if we were to try to arrive at an amicable arrangement, and give the young people a fair start in life."

"Of course I can't answer for all our side," said Mr. Tom, promptly. "You'd better come with me to-morrow, and we'll talk it over with Colonel Fitzgerald and Mr. Mason. I don't bear malice. I think what you say is fair and right—if the settlement is strict. And if it came to be a question of interceding, there's an old friend of ours, Sir George Stratherne, who, I know, knows the Vice-Chancellor very intimately——"

"My dear sir!" the lawyer protested, with either real or affected horror, "do not breathe such a thing!—do not think of such a thing.

The duty of the Vice-Chancellor to his wards is of the extremest kind ; his decisions are beyond suspicion ; what we have got to say we must say in open court."

"But if they were to lock your son up in prison," said Mr. Tom, with a gentle smile, "that couldn't prevent Sir George taking my sister to call on the Vice-Chancellor some afternoon at his own house. And Madge is rather pretty. And she might cry."

"Will you take a glass of wine, Mr. Beresford?" said the lawyer, effusively ; for he saw that he had quite won over Mr. Tom to his side.

"No, thank you," said the latter, rising ; "I must apologise for interrupting your dinner. I'll look up Colonel Fitzgerald and Mason tomorrow morning, and bring them along here most likely ; that will be the simplest way. I suppose you are likely to know sooner than any one where these two fugitives have got to?"

"I think so. I have sent an advertisement to the morning papers. I shall certainly counsel my son to surrender at once and throw himself on the mercy of the Court. My dear sir, I am exceedingly obliged to you for your kindness, your very great kindness, in calling."

“Oh, don’t mention it,” said Mr. Tom, going to the door. And then he added, ruefully, “Now I’ve got to go and hunt up my friend, and tell him that my own sister has jilted him. You’ve no idea what a treat that will be !”

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT LAST.

HE found Frank King in the little room in Cleveland Row, alone, sitting before the fire, a shut book on the small table beside him.

"I've got bad news for you, King," he said, bluntly. "I wish it hadn't been my sister. But you know what women are. It's better to have nothing at all to do with them."

"But what is it?" Frank King said, with some alarm on his face.

"Madge has bolted."

"Madge has bolted?" the other repeated, staring at Mr. Tom in a bewildered sort of way.

"Yes. Gone and married that fellow Hanbury. This morning. I'm very sorry I have to come to you with a story like that about my own sister."

Mr. Tom was very much surprised to find his friend jump up from the chair and seize him by the arm.

"Do you know this, Beresford," he said, in

great excitement, "you have taken a millstone from my neck. I have been sitting wondering whether I shouldn't cut my throat at once, or make off for Australia——"

"Oh, come, I say!" interposed Mr. Tom, with a quick flush.

"Oh, you needn't think I have anything to say against your sister!" exclaimed his friend—on whose face there was a sudden and quite radiant gladness. "You don't understand it at all, Beresford. It will take some explanation. But I assure you you could not have brought me pleasanter news; and yet I have not a word to say against your sister. I know that is a privilege you reserve for yourself; and quite right too."

It was manifestly clear that Captain King was not shamming satisfaction: not for many a day had his face looked so bright.

"Well, I'm glad you take it that way," said Mr. Tom. "I thought you would be cut up. Most fellows are, though they pretend not to be. I really do believe you're rather glad that Madge has given you the slip."

"Sit down, Beresford, and I will tell you all about it. I proposed to your sister Anne years ago."

"To Nan? Why wasn't I told?"

“These things are not generally preached from the house-tops. She refused me point-blank; and I knew she was a girl who knew her own mind. Then I rejoined my ship, and remained mostly abroad for a long time. I fancied it would all blow over; but it didn’t; I was harder hit than I thought; and then, you know, sailors are driven to think of bygone things. Well, you remember when I came home—when I met you in the street. I thought I should like to have just another glimpse of Nan—of Miss Anne, I mean—before she married the parson. Do you remember my going into the drawing-room? Madge was there—the perfect image of Nan! Indeed, I thought at first she was Nan herself. And wasn’t it natural I should imagine the two sisters must be alike in disposition too? And then, as it was hopeless about Nan, I fancied—I imagined—well, the truth is, I made a most confounded mistake, Beresford; and the only thing I have been thinking of, day and night, of late, was what was the proper and manly thing to do—whether to tell Madge frankly, or whether to say nothing with the hope that after marriage it would all come right. And now you needn’t wonder at my being precious glad she has herself settled the affair; and there is not a human being in

the world more heartily wishes her lifelong happiness than I do. And I wish to goodness I knew some way of letting her know that too."

Tom stretched out his legs—his hands were in his pockets—and said, contemplatively—

"So you thought Madge was the same as Nan. I could have told you different, if you had asked me. You thought you could find another girl like Nan. If you want to try, you'll have to step out. By the time you've found her, the Wandering Jew 'll be a fool compared to you. Girls like Nan don't grow on every blackberry bush."

"I know that," said Frank King, with a sigh.

Then Mr. Tom looked at his watch.

"I'm very hungry," said he. "Have you dined?"

"No, I have not. I was going to walk along to the club when you came in."

"Come with me to the Waterloo. You see, something must be done about these two ninnies. He must get something to do; and set to work. The Baby has never been accustomed to live up a tree. She must have a proper house."

Frank King got his coat and hat; and they both went out. He was thinking of his own affairs mostly—and of this singular sense of relief

that seemed to permeate him ; Mr. Tom, on the other hand, was discussing the various aspects of the elopement, more particularly with regard to the Court of Chancery. During dinner the two friends arrived at the conclusion that people generally would look upon the affair as a harmless, or even humorous, escapade ; and that the Court, seeing that the thing was done, would allow the young people to go their way, with a suitable admonition.

This was not quite what happened, however. To begin with, there was a clamour of contention and advice among guardians and friends ; there were anonymous appeals to the runaways in agony-columns ; there were futile attempts made to pacify the Court of Chancery. All the Beresfords came up to town, except Nan, who remained to look after the Brighton house. The chief difficulty of the moment was to discover the whereabouts of Mr. John Hanbury. That gentleman was coy ; and wanted to find out something of what was likely to happen to him if he emerged from his hiding-place. At last it was conveyed to him that he was only making matters worse : then he wrote from certain furnished apartments in a house on the southwest side of Regent's Park ; finally there was a series of business interviews, and it was arranged

that on a particular day he should attend the court and hear the decision of the Vice-Chancellor.

On that fateful morning, poor Madge, her pretty eyes all bedimmed with tears, and her lips tremulous, was with her sisters and mother in the rooms in Bruton Street; the gentlemen only attended the Court. Jack Hanbury was looking exceedingly nervous and pale. And indeed, when the case came on, and the Vice-Chancellor began to make certain observations, even Mr. Tom, whose care for the future of his sister had now quite overcome all his scorn for that fellow Hanbury, grew somewhat alarmed. The Court did not at all appear inclined to take the free-and-easy view of the matter that had been anticipated. The Vice-Chancellor's sentences, one after the other, seemed to become more and more severe, as he described the gross conduct and contempt of which this young man had been guilty. He deplored the condition of the law in England, which allowed persons to get married on the strength of false statements. He wound up his lecture, which had a conciseness and pertinence about it not often found in lectures, by the brief announcement that he should forthwith make an order committing Mr. John Hanbury to Holloway prison.

There was an ominous silence for a brief

second or so. Then the Court was addressed by Mr. Rupert—who was Mary Beresford's husband, and a fairly well known Q.C.—who made a very humble and touching little appeal. He said he represented the relatives of the young lady; he was himself a near relative; and they were all inclined to beg his Lordship to take a merciful view of the case. They did not think the young man, though he had acted most improperly, was inspired by mercenary motives. He was now in Court; and was anxious to make the most profound apology, if his Lordship——

But at this moment his Lordship, by the slightest of gestures, seemed to intimate that Mr. Rupert was only wasting time; and the end of it was that Mr. Jack Hanbury, after having heard a little more lecturing on the heinousness of his conduct, found himself under the charge of the tipstaff of the Court, with Holloway prison as his destination. It was not to be considered as a humorous escapade after all.

“Madge will have a fit,” said Mr. Tom, when they were outside again. “Some one must go and tell her. I shan’t.”

“I knew he must be committed,” said Mr. Rupert to the young man's father. “There was no help for that; his contempt of Court was too heinous. Now the proper thing to do is to let

him have a little dose of prison—the authority of the Court must be vindicated, naturally ; and then we must have a definite scheme for the establishment of the young man in business before we beg the Court to reconsider the matter. I mean, you must name a sum ; and it must be ready. And then there must be an understanding that Miss Beresford—I mean Mrs. Hanbury's—small fortune shall be settled on herself."

"My advice," remarked Mr. Tom, "is that Madge should go herself and see the Vice-Chancellor. She might do the pathetic business—a wife and not a widow, or whatever the poetry of the thing is. I think it's deuced hard lines to lock up a fellow for merely humbugging an old parson up in Kentish Town. Why shouldn't people get married when they want to? Fancy having to live three weeks in Kentish Town! I wouldn't live three weeks in Kentish Town to marry a duchess."

"I am afraid," said Mr. Rupert, drily, "that the Vice-Chancellor is too familiar with the sight of pretty damsels in distress. I think, Mr. Hanbury, if you can produce a deed of partnership with your friends in Southampton, that would be more likely to influence the Court. On our side we agree. And of course there must be a humble apology from the young man himself.

We had better wait a week, or a fortnight, and then renew the application. I will go myself and tell the young lady what has happened."

Madge did not go into a fit at all ; but what she did do was to decline positively to remain in Bruton Street. No ; back she would go to the rooms that her dear Jack had taken for her. They might come to see her there if they liked ; but that was her home ; it was her place as a wife to remain in the home that her husband had chosen for her. Madge did not cry as much as had been expected : she was angry and indignant, and she said hard things about the condition of the law in England ; and she had a vague belief that her brother Tom was a renegade and traitor and coward because he did not challenge the Vice-Chancellor to a duel on Calais sands.

Nevertheless, in her enforced widowhood, Madge found time to write the inclosed letter—nay, she went first of all to the trouble of walking down Baker Street until she came to a shop where she could get very pretty and nicely scented note-paper for the purpose :—

"DEAR FRANK,—Tom brought me yesterday your very manly and generous letter, and I must write and thank you for your kind wishes for my

happiness. It's dreadful to think that persons should be shut up in prison, when everybody is agreed it is needless—merely to satisfy a form. You are very kind in what you say ; you were always kind to me—kinder than I deserved. But I didn't think you would mind very much my running away ; for I am sure you care far more for Nan than you ever cared for me ; and now Edith declares that Nan has been in love with you all the time. I hear you have been doing everything in your power towards getting poor Jack out of prison ; and so I thought I would do you a good turn also. You might take this letter to Nan, and ask her if every word in it isn't true—unless you think you've had enough of our family already. Dear Frank, I am so glad you forgive me ; and when I get out of my present deep distress I hope you will come and see us and be like old friends.—Yours sincerely,

“MADGE HANBURY.”

At this present moment Captain King, as they still call him (for all these things happened not so long ago), considers this letter the most valuable he ever received. Not any message from home announcing to the schoolboy that a hamper would speedily arrive ; not any com-

munication from the Admiralty after he had arrived at man's estate ; nay, not any one of Nan's numerous love-letters—witty, and tender, and clever, as these were—had for him anything like the gigantic importance of this letter. It is needless to say that, very shortly after the receipt of it, and without saying a word to anybody, he slipped down to Brighton, and got a room at the Norfolk.

It was so strange to think that Nan was a little way along there ; and that there was still a chance that that same Nan—the wonder of the world with whose going away from him the world had got quite altered somehow—might still be his ! It bewildered him as yet. To think of Nan at Kingscourt !—her presence filling the house with sunlight ; charming everybody with her quiet, humorous ways, and her self-possession, and her sweetness, and the faithfulness of her frank, clear eyes ! And all his thinking came back to the one point. This was now Nan herself he had a chance of winning ; not any imaginary Nan ; not any substitute ; not any vision to be wavering this way and that, but the very Nan herself. And if it was true—if the real Nan, after all, was to go hand-in-hand through life with him—where, of all the places in the world, should they first go together ? To

that far-away inn at Splügen, surely ! Now it would be his own Nan who would sit at the small table, and laugh with her shining, clear eyes. She would walk with him up the steep Pass ; the sunlight on her pink cheeks ; he would hear the chirp of her boots on the wet snow.

Amid all this wild whirl of hope and doubt and delightful assurance, it was hard to have to wait for an opportunity of speaking to Nan alone. He would not go to the house, lest there should be visitors, or some one staying there ; he would rather catch Nan on one of her pilgrimages in the country or along the downs, with solitude and silence to aid him in his prayer. But that chance seemed far off. He watched for Nan incessantly ; and his sharp sailor's eyes followed her keenly, while he kept at a considerable distance. But Nan seemed to be very busy at this time. Again and again he was tempted to speak to her as she came out of this or that shop, or when he saw her carrying an armful of toys into some small back street. But he was afraid. There was so much to win ; so much to lose. He guessed that sooner or later the vagrant blood in Nan would drive her to seek the solitariness of the high cliffs over the sea.

It turned out differently, however. One

squally and stormy morning he saw her leave the house, her ulster buttoned up, her hat well down over her brows. He let her pass the hotel, and slipped out afterwards. By and by she turned up into the town, and finally entered a stationer's shop, where there was a public library. No doubt she had merely come to order some books, he said to himself, down-heartedly, and would go straight back again.

However, on coming out, he noticed her glance up at the driven sky, where the clouds were breaking here and there. Then she went down East Street towards the sea. Then she passed the Aquarium by the lower road. This he could not understand at all, as she generally kept to the cliffs.

He soon discovered her intention. There was a heavy sea rolling in ; and she had always had a great delight in watching the big waves come swinging past the head of the Chain Pier. That, indeed, turned out to be her destination. When he had seen the slight, girlish-looking figure well away out there, he also went on the pier, and followed.

It is needless to say that there was not a human being out there at the end. Tags and rags of flying clouds were sending showers of rain spinning across ; between them great bursts

of sunlight flooded the sea; and the vast green masses of water shone as they broke on the wooden piles and thundered on below. When he reached the head of the pier, he found that Nan, who fancied herself entirely alone, was resting her two elbows on the bar, and so holding on her hat, as she looked down on the mighty volumes of water that broke and rushed roaring below.

He touched her on the shoulder; she jumped up with a start, and turned, growing a little pale as she confronted him. He, also, had an apprehensive look in his eyes—perhaps it was that that frightened her.

“Nothing has happened to Madge?” she said, quickly.

“No. But come over there to the shelter. I wish to show you a letter she has written.”

A few steps brought them to a sudden silence; it was like stepping from the outer air into a diving-bell.

“Nan, I want you to read this letter, and tell me if it is true.”

He gave it her; she read it; then slowly, very slowly, the one hand holding the letter dropped, and she stood there silent, her eyes downcast.

“Nan, I have loved you since the very first

night I ever saw you. I tried to make believe that Madge was you ; Madge herself has saved us from what might have happened through that desperate mistake. And you, Nan—you are free now—there is no one in the way—is it true what Edith says ? ”

“ It isn’t quite true,” said Nan, in a very low voice ; and her fingers were making sad work with Madge’s letter. “ I mean—if she means—what you can say—since the very first night that we met. But I think at least—it is true—since ”—and here Nan looked up at him with her faithful eyes, and in them there was something that was neither laughing nor crying, but was strangely near to both—“ since—since ever we parted at Como ! ”

CHAPTER XXIV.

“BRING HOME THE BRIDE SO FAIR !”

“POOR Jack !” that was all Madge’s cry. She did not care what arrangement was being got up by the parents and guardians interested. She did not want her fortune settled on herself. To her it did not matter whether the brewery was in Southampton or in Jerusalem. All her piteous appeal was that her dear Jack should be got out of prison ; and the opinion that she had formed of the gross tyranny, and cruelty, and obstinacy of English law was of a character that dare not be set forth here.

“What is the use of it ?” she would say. “What good can it do except to keep people miserable ?”

“My dear child,” the sighing and sorely-troubled mother would answer, “the Vice-Chancellor has admitted that it can do no good. But the authority of the Court must be vindicated——”

"It is nothing but a mean and contemptible revenge!" exclaimed Madge.

However, Mr. Tom took a much more cool and business-like view of the matter.

"When he is let out," he remarked, "I hope the Vice-Chancellor will make the other side pay the costs of all these applications and proceedings. I don't see why we should pay, simply because Jack Hanbury went and made an ass of himself."

"I beg you to remember that you are speaking of my husband!" said Madge, with a sudden fierceness.

"Oh, well, but didn't he?" Mr. Tom said. "What was the use of bolting like that, when he knew he must be laid by the heels? Why didn't he go to his father and uncle to begin with, and get them to make this arrangement they have now, and then have gone to the chief clerk and showed him that there was no objection anywhere——"

"It was because you were all against him," said poor Madge, beginning to cry. "Everybody—everybody. And now he may be shut up there for a whole year—or two years——"

"Oh, but he isn't so badly off," said Mr. Tom, soothingly. "You can see they treat him very well. By Jingo, if it was the treadmill, now—

that would exercise his toes for him. I tried it once in York Castle ; and I can tell you when you find this thing pawing at you over your head it's like an elephant having a game with you. Never mind, Madge. Don't cry. Look here ; I'll bet you five sovereigns to one that they let him out on the next application—that's for Thursday. Are you on ? ”

“ Do you mean it ? ” she said, looking up.

“ I do.”

It was wonderful how quickly the light came into her face.

“ Then there is a chance ? ” she said. “ I can't believe the others ; for they are only trying to comfort me. But if you would bet on it, Tom—then there's really a chance.”

“ Bet's off. You should have snapped at it, Madge. Never mind, you'll have your dear Jack : that'll do instead.”

That afternoon Mary Beresford, now Mrs. Rupert, called, and Mr. Tom, with much dignity of manner, came into the room holding an open letter in his hand,

“ Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “ and friends assembled, I have a piece of news for you. Mr. Francis Holford King, late Commander in Her Majesty's Navy, has just contracted a—what d'ye call it?—kind of engagement with Miss

Anne Beresford of that ilk. It strikes me this is what is termed consolation-stakes——”

“There you are quite wrong,” said Madge, promptly, and cheerfully. “He meant to make me the consolation-stakes ; for it was Nan that he wanted to marry all the way through.”

“Well, I shall be glad to see you all married,” said Tom. “I’ve had enough bother with you.”

“You look quite worn out,” his eldest sister remarked.

“At least,” he said, sitting down in an easy-chair and stretching out his legs, “at least I have gained some wisdom. I see the puzzlement you girls are in who haven’t got to earn your own living. You don’t know what on earth to do with yourselves. You read Ruskin, and think you should be earnest ; but you don’t know what to be earnest about. Then you take to improving your mind ; and cram your head full of earth-currents, and equinoxes, and eclipses of the moon. But what does it all come to ? You can’t do anything with it. Even if you could come and tell me that a lime-burner in Jupiter has thrown his wig into the fire, and so altered the spectrum, what’s that to me ? Then you have a go at philanthropy—that’s more practical ; Sunday-school teaching, mending children’s clothes, doing for other people what they

ought to do for themselves, and generally cultivating pauperism. Then, lo and behold! in the middle of all this there comes by a good-looking young fellow; and phew! all your grand ideas are off like smoke; and it's all 'Dear Jack!' and 'Dear Alfred!' and 'I'll go to the ends of the earth with my sodger laddie!'—Oh, I know what life is. I see you girls begin with all your fine ideas, and reading up, and earnestness——"

"I suppose, then, there is no such thing as the formation of character," said his eldest sister, calmly.

"The formation of character!" exclaimed Mr. Tom. "Out of books? Why, the only one among you who has any character worth mentioning is Nan. Do you think she got it out of books? No, she didn't. She got it—she got it——"

Here Mr. Tom paused for a second; but only to make a wilder dash.

"——out of the sunlight! There's a grand poetical idea for you. Nan has been more in the open than any of you; and the sunlight has filled her brain, and her mind, and her disposition altogether——"

"I presume that also accounts for the redness of her hair?" said Mrs. Rupert.

Tom rose to his feet. There was an air of

resignation on his face as he left the room. He said, half to himself,

“Well, Nature was right in making me a man. I couldn’t have mustered up half enough spite to make a passable woman.”

Now, the end of the Madge and Jack episode was in this wise. On the second application the Vice-Chancellor flatly refused to release the young man from prison. His gross offence had not yet been purged. It was quite true, his Lordship admitted, that the young lady and the guardians and relatives on both sides were also sharing in this punishment; and it was unfortunate. Moreover, arrangements had now been made which seemed to render the marriage a perfectly eligible one, if only it had been properly brought about. Nevertheless, the Court could not overlook the young man’s conduct; in prison he was; and in prison he must remain.

More tears on the part of Madge. More advice from Mr. Tom that she should go and plead with the Vice-Chancellor herself; he was sure her pretty, weeping eyes would soften the flintiest heart. Correspondence addressed by Captain Frank King to Admiral Sir George Stratherne, K.C.B., containing suggestions not in consonance with the lofty integrity of British courts of law.

Then, at last, the Vice-Chancellor relented. Mr. Hanbury had given an undertaking to execute any settlement the Court might think fit with regard to the young lady's property. Then he must pay all costs of the proceedings, likewise the guardians' costs. This being so, his Lordship was disposed to take a merciful view of the case; and would make an order discharging the young man from prison.

"Oh, Jack," poor Madge exclaimed, when he was restored to her, "shall I ever forget what you have suffered for my sake?"

Jack looked rather foolish among all these people; but at last he plucked up courage, and went and made a straightforward apology to Lady Beresford; and said he hoped this piece of folly would soon be forgotten; and that Madge would be happy after all. The sisters were disposed to pet him. Tom tolerated him a little. Then there was a general bustle; for they were all (including Frank King) going down again to Brighton; and they made a large party.

How clear the air and the sunlight were after the close atmosphere of London! The shining sea—the fresh breeze blowing in—the busy brightness and cheerfulness of the King's Road—it all seemed new and delightful again! And

of course amidst the general clamour and commotion of getting into the house, who was to take much notice of Nan, or watch her self-conscious shyness, or regard the manner in which she received Frank King after his absence? You see, Nan was always wanted to do things, or fetch things, or send for things. "She's a housekeeperish kind of young party," Tom used to say of her, when he had coolly sent her to look out his shooting-boots.

The spring-time was come; not only was the sunshine clearer, and the wind from the sea softer and fresher, but human nature, also, grew conscious of vague anticipations and an indefinable delight. Flowers from the sheltered valleys behind the downs began to appear in the streets. The year was opening; soon the colours of the summer would be shining over the land.

"Nan-nie," said Frank King to her who was on most occasions now his only and dear companion, as they were walking along one of the country ways, "don't you think June is a good month to get married in?"

"Frank dear," she said, "I haven't had much experience."

"Now, look here, Nan," he said—the others were a long way ahead, and he could scold her

as he liked. "You may have some strong points—wisdom, perhaps—and a capacity for extracting money out of people for lifeboats—and a knack of boxing the ears of small boys whom you find shying stones at sparrows—I say you may have your strong points; but flippancy isn't one of them. And this is a very serious matter."

"I know it is," said Nan, demurely. "And far more serious than you imagine. For, do you know, Frank, that the moment I get married I shall cease to be responsible for the direction of my own life altogether. You alone will be responsible. Whatever you say I should do, I will do; what you say I must think, or believe, or try for, that will be my guide. Don't you know that I have been trying all my life to get rid of the responsibility of deciding for myself? I nearly ended—like such a lot of people!—in 'going over to the Church.' Oh, Frank," she said, "I think if it hadn't been for you I should have married a clergyman, and been good."

She laughed a little, soft, low laugh; and continued:

"No, I think that never could have happened. But I should have done something—gone into one of those visiting sisterhoods, or got trained as a nurse—you don't know what a good hos-

pital nurse you spoiled in me. However, now that is not my business. Undine got a soul when she married; I give up mine. I shall efface myself. It's you who have to tell me what to think, and believe, and try to do."

"Very well," said he. "I shall begin by advising you to give up cultivating the acquaintance of tinkers and gypsies; and first of all to resolve not to speak again to Singing Sal."

"Oh, but that's foolish—that is unnecessary!" she said, with a stare; and he burst out laughing.

"Here we are at the outset!" he said. "But don't you think, Nan-nie, you might let things go on as they are? You haven't done so badly after all. Do you know that people don't altogether detest you? Some of them would even say that you made the world a little brighter and pleasanter for those around you; and that is always something."

"But it's so little," said Nan. "And—and I had thought of—of I don't know what, I believe—in that Cathedral at Lucerne—and now I am going to do just like everybody else. It's rather sneaky."

"What is?" he asked. "To be a good woman?"

"Oh, you are not philosophical," she said.

"And me—me too. My brain, what there was of it, is clean gone; my heart has got complete mastery. It is really ludicrous that my highest ambition, and my highest delight, should be to be able to say 'I love you,' and to go on saying it any number of times. But then, dear Frank, when all this nonsense is over between us, then we will set to work and try and do some good. There must be something for us to do in the world."

"Oh yes, no doubt," he said, "and do you know when I think this nonsense will be over between you and me, Nan?—when you and I are lying dead together in Kingscourt churchyard."

She touched his hand with her hand—for a moment.

"And perhaps not even then, Frank."

Well, it was a double wedding, after all; and Mr. Roberts was determined that it should be memorable in Brighton, if music, and flowers, and public charities would serve. Then Mr. and Mrs. Jack Hanbury were to come along from Southampton; and Mr. Jacomb had, in the most frank and manly fashion, himself asked permission to assist at the marriage ceremony. There were,

of course, many presents; two of which were especially grateful to Nan. The first was a dragon-fly in rubies and diamonds, the box enclosing which was wrapped round by a sheet of note-paper really belonging to her Majesty, and hailing from Whitehall. These were the words scrawled on the sheet of paper:—

“This is for the wedding of the BEAUTIFUL WRETCH, who has now completed the list of her atrocities by jilting her oldest sweetheart.—G.S.”

The second present that was particularly prized by Nan carries us on to the wedding-day. It was one of the clearest of clear June days; a fresh southerly wind tempering the heat; there was scarcely a cloud in the blue. How these rumours get about it is impossible to say; but a good many people seemed to have discovered that there was to be a double wedding; and there was an unusual crowd about the entrance to the church and along both sides of the roofed portico. Among these people was one who attracted a little mild polite curiosity. She was a country-looking, fresh-complexioned young woman, who was smartly dressed and trim as to ribbons and such things; and she held in her hand a basket of fairly good size and of fancy wicker-work. And this basket, those nearest her could see, held nothing else than a mass of wild

roses, all with the thorns carefully removed from the stems, and set in a bed of moss and sweetbrier leaves. It was such a bouquet, surely, as had never been presented to a bride before—if, indeed, it was intended for the bride.

That was soon to be seen. The great organ was still pealing out Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" (Mr. Tom had offered to give £10 to the poor-box of the choir if the choristers would play instead the Swedish "Bring home the bride so fair!"—forgetting that there were two brides, and that Edith was dark) when the first of the bridal procession came along, Edith and her husband and her bridesmaids. Then came Nan. As she was passing, the fresh-coloured wench timidly stepped forward and offered her the basket of wild roses. Nan stopped; glanced at her, and recognised her; and then, to the wonder of the crowd, they saw the young bride take the basket with her trembling white-gloved fingers, while the other hand was boldly put forward to shake hands with the country lass. Singing Sal was greatly taken aback; but she took Nan's hand for the briefest second, and managed to say something quite incoherent about "long life and happiness, Miss—I beg your pardon, Miss—Ma'am;" and then the gleaming procession passed on.

Nan was very proud of that basket of wild flowers. She would not part with it. She had it placed before her on the table when all the people had assembled and sat down. And perhaps there was one there who, looking alternately at the bright-eyed bride who sat beside him, and at that basket of wild roses, red, and white, and pink, and whitish red and whitish-pink, may have said to himself that there was no red one there half so red as her lips, and no white one half so white as her clear and shining soul.

THE END.

The following is a complete list of the new Half-Crown Edition of Mr. BLACK's Novels, and the probable order of their monthly issue beginning January 1892.

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|---|--|
| A Daughter of Heth. (<i>Ready.</i>) | Sunrise. (<i>Ready.</i>) |
| The Strange Adventures of a Phaeton. (<i>Ready.</i>) | The Beautiful Wretch. (<i>Ready.</i>) |
| A Princess of Thule. (<i>Ready.</i>) | Shandon Bells. |
| In Silk Attire. (<i>Ready.</i>) | Adventures in Thule. |
| Kilmeny. (<i>Ready.</i>) | Yolande. |
| Madcap Violet. (<i>Ready.</i>) | Judith Shakespeare. |
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